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THE saint DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Edited by LESLIE CHARTERIS

The Death Stone
by CORNELL WOOLRICH

The Treasure of Mr. Reeder
by EDGAR WALLACE

A Case for Colonel March
by CARTER DICKSON

Alias the Killer
by GEORGE HARMON COXE

The Missing Diamond
by HUGH WILEY

THE PLUPERFECT LADY

A NEW SAINT NOVELET by LESLIE CHARTERIS

SOME OLD, SOME NEW — THE FINEST IN MYSTERY FICTION

A KING-SIZE PUBLICATION

FEW THINGS are as dangerous as a superlative—a philosophy which was most neatly epitomized, I think, by the funny man who was content to be billed as the second best comedian in the world. But although I have tried to cure a natural propensity for sticking my neck out, when I have been inescapably cornered with the question of which author I personally rate the best of all mystery writers, I finally have to come out and say that in my opinion, in the field of the finest and purest type of puzzle, the incomparably best stories I ever read were signed either by Carter Dickson or John Dickson Carr. And that is no weasel answer either; for, as the similarity of names suggests, they are both the same man.

So it is a big month in my editorial life to be able to present him for the first time in this magazine, in his Carter Dickson identity, with A CASE FOR COLONEL MARCH, originally published as HOT MONEY, in his famous book "The Department of Queer Complaints." And I only hope that some day we may be able to follow this with a John Dickson Carr.

But no less great, in quite a different category, the late Edgar Wallace remains one of the immortals of this century and always one of my favorite entertainers. In THE TREASURE OF MR. REEDER he gives one of his own inimitable twists to the eternal underworld myth about the ill-gotten wealth of policemen.

I have often remarked that it seems odd that almost every time a woman sits down to write a detective story she puts on the fictional personality of a man, while a story written by a woman as a woman is a comparative rarity. But Cornell Woolrich, a man indeed, has pulled an even more uncommon switch by writing in the first person as a woman, in THE DEATH STONE—and adds a couple of first-class male characterizations besides.

In THE MISSING DIAMOND, Hugh Wiley gives us another fast and clever exploit of James Lee, a Chinese who is happily devoid of the slightest sinister quality. And in ALIAS THE KILLER, by George Harmon Coxe, for another unusual angle, the "killer" happens to be a cop who only wants to live down the name.

And this month, in PLUPERFECT LADY, the Saint has gone far afield, to a beleaguered plantation in guerrilla-ridden Malaya, for what I honestly think is one of his most dramatic adventures. Since I started this off so boldly, why should I mince words now?

Leslie Charteris

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THE saint DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER, 1955
VOL. 4, NO. 5

The Pluperfect Lady 4
by LESLIE CHARTERIS

Alias the Killer 41
by GEORGE HARMON COXE

The Death Stone 54
by CORNELL WOOLRICH

As the Inspector Said 83
by CYRIL HARE

Ready Money 88
by JOHN FALKNER

One Night in Paris 91
by WALTER B. GIBSON

The Missing Diamond 120
by HUGH WILEY

A Case for Colonel March 130
by CARTER DICKSON

The Treasure of Mr. Reeder 142
by EDGAR WALLACE

The Flattie 157
by RAY HUMPHRIES

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the pluperfect lady

by . . . Leslie Charteris

In Malaya a moon bloodstone-red and a spilled highball posed for Simon Templar a fine problem in murder—in four rising octaves.

SIMON TEMPLAR stayed at the Raffles Hotel in Singapore for sentimental reasons. Although more modern and more luxurious caravanserais had been built in the many years since he had last been there, the Raffles was one of the places that was simply synonymous with Singapore to him, as it always will be to the real Far East hands from away back. And as to why that one particular place had won out over two others almost equally traditional, Major Vernon Ascony had a theory.

"I just looked at the name on the front and felt sure you couldn't have resisted it," Ascony said.

"Since you couldn't possibly have been thinking of A. J. Raffles, the immortal Amateur Cracksman of fiction," said the Saint, "I wonder what there can be about me that reminds you of Sir Stamford Raffles, the illustrious pioneer and Empire builder, whose name is commemorated on so many landmarks of this romantic city."

Major Ascony permitted the vestige of a smile to stir under the shadow of his closely-clipped mustache.

"Nothing, old chap. Positively not one single thing."

HERE IS THE SAINT IN A BRAND NEW CRIME ADVENTURE AS RIFE WITH INTRIGUE AS SINGAPORE'S VIOLENT MONDAYS.

"And why were you trying to find me anyway?" Simon inquired.

"I'm with the Police," Ascony said, and modestly refrained from specifying that he was an Assistant Commissioner.

The Saint sighed.

"One day I'm going to have this printed on a card," he said. "But if you'll accept it verbally, I can save you a lot of time. No, I am not here to stir up any trouble. No, I am not looking for any crime or criminals. Yes, I am just an ordinary tourist. Of course, if something irresistibly intriguing happens under my nose, I can't promise not to get involved in it. But I don't intend to start anything."

"What made you decide to come here?" Ascony inquired. "This is a bit off your beat, isn't it?"

"It wasn't always. As a matter of fact, one of my first big adventures started not far from here, though it came to a head in England. But that was an awful long time ago. And the other day, out of the blue, I had a sudden crazy belt of nostalgia: I just had to come back and see how much the place had changed. I hadn't anything else in mind for a couple of weeks, and Pan-American flies here awful fast. I remember the first time—it took me six weeks on a freighter from Lima."

Ascony proffered his cigarette case, and Simon accepted one.

"How about a drink?" Ascony asked.

"I'd like it," Simon said.

They sat down at a table on the terrace overlooking the bustling Esplanade, and a soft-footed "boy" came quickly to dust it off.

"A *stengah,* or something fancier?"

"Peter Dawson will be fine."

"*Dua,*" ordered the Major. He rubbed his mustache thoughtfully. "I suppose you've already noticed a lot of difference?"

"Quite a bit," Simon grinned. "The plumbing especially. And air conditioning, yet. And no more rickshaws."

"Yes, there've been a few improvements. But a lot of things are worse, too."

"I've heard about that. You're pretty high on the Russian list of places to make trouble in."

"It's not too bad right here. We've had a few nasty riots, but nothing so far that we couldn't handle. But it's a bit rugged for the blokes up-country sometimes."

"You've still got those Red guerillas? I thought a namesake of mine cleaned 'em out."

"General Templer? Only he spelt it with an E. You know, when he was sent here, one of the London papers ran a headline about 'The Saint Goes to Malaya'. And people used to ask him if he was any relation of yours. I never found out whether it really amused him or not."

"I thought the manager gave me an odd look when I registered."

Ascony nodded.

"Templer—Sir Gerald, I mean—did a darn good job. But there are still a few too many of those lads at large, with guns hidden away that we dropped to 'em during the occupation, and others that they captured when the Japs gave up. Every now and again they go on a rampage and shoot up a mine or a plantation, so the chaps up there still have to keep armed guards and barricade themselves in at night."

"Sort of like Africa with the Mau Mau?"

"Sort of. Or like America with the Redskins, judging from what I've seen in the pictures."

The boy returned and served them their highballs.

"Well, cheers," Ascony said.

"Cheerio," said the Saint accommodatingly.

Ascony drank, put down his glass, and lighted another cigarette.

"I suppose you wouldn't be interested in seeing that sort of thing," he remarked.

His tone was impeccably casual, so that it would have seemed embarrassingly hypersensitive to attempt to read into it a challenge or a sneer. Yet something deep inside the Saint prickled involuntarily.

"I hate to miss it," he replied. "But I don't suppose the Chamber of Commerce is featuring it as part of a guided tour."

"I could arrange it," Ascony said; and Simon knew then that he had given Ascony precisely the opening that Ascony wanted.

Simon said: "Is it worth all that trouble to get me out of town?"

The police official's infinitesimal smile was permitted to make its tiny diffident movement under the scrubby mustache.

"I won't deny that I'll have a load off my mind when you leave. But I do have another ulterior motive. You could be quite a godsend to a pal of mine up there, while you're having a spot of fun for yourself. Chap by the name of Lavis. A real good egg. Has a place up in Pahang, miles from anywhere, in one of the worst areas."

"What makes you think I'd be a godsend to him?"

"He's been having a rather rough time—ulcers, and fever on top of it. He ought to be in the hospital, actually, but he won't leave the plant. I can't blame him, in a way. You see, up till about a year ago he was doing very well for himself, in fact he was one of the most successful business men in Malaya, and then one day his partner simply skipped out with every penny he could raise on their assets. It was a shocking business.

"Ted Lavis was practically wiped out overnight. This plant

up in Pahang was about all he managed to salvage, and he's trying like the devil to make a go of it, but if anything happened to it he'd really be sunk. He's got a white assistant, of course, and the usual native foremen and guards, but with Lavis himself laid up and his wife having to nurse him it's no picnic for anybody."

"His wife's there with him?"

"Naturally, old chap. A stunning woman—used to be married to a doctor here. The assistant's a bit of a bounder, in my private opinion. But you'll see for yourself. How does it appeal to you?"

Simon was used to the unconventional hospitality of the tropics, but he knew that Major Ascony must have something more in mind than mere friendliness. But since Ascony was obviously not planning to put any cards on the table, the Saint decided to play along with equal inscrutability.

He said blandly: "I'd love it, if you think they'd put up with me."

"I'm sure they'll be glad to. I'll send them a wire at once." Ascony signed the chit which the boy had tucked under the ashtray, and stood up. He seemed to be a very decisive man, in his own way. "Sorry I have to run along now, but I'll ring you first thing in the morning."

Simon waited fatalistically to see what the call would bring. He was sampling his *ketchil makan,* the ritual eye-opener of tea and buttered toast without which the Englishman in the East Indies is not supposed to have the strength to get dressed for breakfast, when the telephone rang.

"Mrs. Lavis wired back that they'll be delighted to have you," Ascony said. "The train leaves in a couple of hours. I hope that isn't rushing you too much. If I can get away, I'll drop by the station and see you off."

With an odd sensation that he was already on an express train hurtling towards some unrevealed rendezvous with destiny, Simon dressed and breakfasted and repacked the few things he had taken from his bag.

He was just settling himself in the corner of a first-class compartment when Major Ascony came along the platform, looking very military in a crisply-laundered uniform with a swagger stick tucked under his arm, and stopped by the open window.

"Ah, there you are, Templar. I see you made it."

"That's a relief," said the Saint seriously. "I wasn't altogether sure that I was here myself."

The Major looked a trifle puzzled, but disciplined himself to suppress it.

"You shouldn't have anything to worry about on the trip," he said. "They haven't wrecked a train for ages."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I've always wanted to be in a good train wreck."

"Give my best to Teddy and Eve, will you? And tell 'em I mean to come up myself the first chance I have to take a few days off."

"I will."

There was a blowing of whistles and a rising tempo of shouts and jabbering around the second and third class carriages as the train crew struggled to separate the travelers from the farewell deputations and pack the former on board so that the train could start. Ascony handed a book through the window.

"Thought you might like something to read on the trip," he said.

"Why, thank you," responded Simon, smiling genially.

"Not at all. You can return it when you come back. It's not a collector's item."

It was a bulky volume entitled *Altogether,* by W. Somerset Maugham, and a glance inside showed that it was a collection of short stories.

"I believe I've read some of these before," Simon said.

"Well, you get more out of some of 'em the second time, I think. Besides, it's more fun to read 'em right where they're supposed to have happened. Might give you a feeling about some things, if you know what I mean."

"They're almost historical now, aren't they?" said the Saint, trying not to sound captious. "Maugham was here long before even my last time, wasn't he?"

"Yes, I dare say he was. But human nature doesn't change much."

The whistling and shouting and jabbering reached a crescendo, and the train gave an authoritative clattering jolt and began to creep forward. Ascony strolled along with it for a few steps, beside the window.

"There's one story especially I'd like to get your reaction to," he said.

"Which one?"

"You'll come to it. Hope you have a good time. So long, old chap."

And merely by ceasing to walk, with a cordial gesture that was half wave and half salute, Ascony made an incontestable exit, being left behind in a moment as the train drew away from him.

II

Simon did little reading on the trip, for he had barely started to turn the pages of the book when he was sociably conscripted by three planters in search of a fourth for bridge. Then there was lunch, the inevitable curry, and afterwards almost everyone fell into a doze, and the Saint himself found it lazily easy to fall in with the custom of the country. He awoke with one of the Malay guards shaking him gently by the shoulder, as he had been enjoined

to do, and saying, "The next stop will be Ayer Pahit, *tuan.*"

During such opportunities as he had had to let his mind wander, he had tried to figure what could lie behind Major Ascony's peculiar behavior, and had had conspicuously negative success. He was reasonably certain that Ascony was not dreaming that the Saint would personally solve the problem of the Red guerillas, when a prolonged and large-scale military operation had not completely succeeded in eradicating them.

It had to be something much less far-fetched and more limited than that. But the only further assumption that seemed safe was that it must be something involving the personalities he was going to meet, and Simon stepped out on the platform not quite literally like an outlaw entering a hostile city, but with a similar feeling of keeping his weight lightly on his toes and his eyes alert for more than the ordinary visitor would see.

Almost as soon as he stepped off the Malay guards clambered aboard again with their rifles slung, some of them riding on the engine, and the train tooted its whistle and was off again with its usual disjointed preliminary lurch. As it pulled out it revealed on the other side of the tracks a half-dozen *atap*-thatched ramshackle buildings, one of which had double doors wide open and from what could be seen of its murky, mysteriously cluttered interior appeared to be a combined general store and saloon, and behind those buildings was the solid jungle, crowding in on them obtrusively as if it actively resented the few square yards that they had usurped from it and was impatient to absorb them again: this was all that could be called the village, if it could be dignified even by that name.

On the side of the tracks where the Saint stood was the Lavis estate, the center and only reason for existence of the settlement called Ayer Pahit or its railway station, which consisted of a ten-foot-square wooden hut at the side of the platform. Close behind that was a very large corrugated iron shed like a warehouse, and a little farther back still was a large rectangular building of smoke-streaked concrete topped with an incomprehensible tangle of pipes, with an incongruously modern and industrial look to it.

The concrete building was set right into the side of a cleared hill that rose away from the railroad. A little above it were two long stark buildings like barracks, recognizable as coolie quarters, and much further up was what had to be the manager's house, also of wood and *atap,* but set up on pilings and with a long shady screened verandah running the whole length of it. Even the big house was not on the very

hilltop, but some thirty feet below it, the crest itself being taken up with something with square low white walls which at first sight looked like a kind of fortification but which Simon reminiscently identified as the top of a water-storage tank. There were a couple of small individual cottages, probably for native foremen, on the flanks of the hill between the barracks and the big house, and for background again the dense, unbroken, all-smothering jungle.

Simon took in the essential topography with one deliberate panoramic survey before he lowered his gaze to explore the vicinity of the platform. He saw a handful of idlers of the nondescript and seemingly purposeless kind who can be found hanging around every wayside railroad station on earth, and two smart-looking young Malays in khaki shorts and shirts who carried Lee-Enfield rifles and who at first he thought must be guards left over from the train until he realized from their rather more informal uniforms that they must be constabulary attached to the estate; and then he saw Eve Lavis coming towards him from the hut that served as a station office, and for a definite time thereafter he had no eyes for anything else.

Ascony had called her "stunning," but the cliché was not truly descriptive at all. She was not an impact, she was an experience, which from being more gradual was all the more enduring in its effect.

His first impression of her, foolishly it seemed at the time, was one of coolness. Even at a little distance he noticed that the plain white skirt and shirt that she wore had a crackling fresh look, and yet the holster belt with a revolver hanging low on the right side did not look as if it had just been put on. She had very fine ash-blonde hair of the natural kind which often looks almost gray, yet in spite of the sweltering humidity there was nothing dank or bedraggled about it. As she came closer still he saw that her wide-set level eyes were another gray, clear and cool as mountain lakes under a clouded sky.

The experience continued to build impressions into an inevitable structure. He had only observed at first that her figure appeared to be pleasantly normal in size and proportions: it became a conviction later that the only right word for it was "perfect." Because it was so perfectly without deficiencies or exaggerations it was not immediately striking, but after a while you were aware of it as the most symmetrical and shapely and desirable body that a woman could have.

In the same way her face was not beautiful with the startling prettiness that snaps heads around and evokes reflex whistles. You became fascinated one by one

with the broad brow, the small chiseled nose, the delicately contoured cheekbones, the wide firm-lipped mouth that opened over small teeth like twin rows of graduated pearls, the strong chin and the smooth neck that carried it with queenly poise, and presently you felt that you were looking at Beauty itself made carnal in one assemblage of wholly satisfying features.

"You must be Mr. Templar," she said. "I'm Eve Lavis."

She put out her hand, and it was as cool and dry as she looked, so that the Saint was aware of the stickiness that even his superbly conditioned body had conceded to the heat.

"I'm a fairly housebroken guest," he said. "I never smoke in bed, and I seldom shine my shoes with the bath towels. Sometimes I don't even wear shoes."

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," she said. "I was sending a wire to Vernon—the railway ticker in our telegraph station. I told him you got here all right."

The reversal of ordinary sequence, that she had waited to complete a telegram and mention his arrival before even greeting him, renewed and redoubled the sense of abnormal coolness that had first struck him. Yet there was nothing chilly or unfriendly about her manner. He had a sudden sharply-etched feeling that it was only her way of doing things, a disconcertingly direct and practical way.

"Shall we go up to the house?" she said. "The boy will take your bag."

She beckoned a Chinese who had been patiently waiting, who took the Saint's suitcase and hurried away with it straight up the hill. Mrs. Lavis started to walk in an easier direction, and Simon fell in step beside her. The two Malay guards followed at a discreet distance.

"I may as well point out the sights as we pass them," she said. "Did Vernon tell you anything about what we do here?"

"Not very much," Simon admitted. "He did mention a Plant, but I wasn't too clear whether it grew or made things."

"Vernon can be terribly vague. It's a wood distillation plant."

"I'm still not much wiser."

"You might call it charcoal making. But when you do it the modern way, the by-products are actually worth more than the charcoal, so we call it wood distillation. The coolies cut wood in the jungle, and bring it down here in trucks."

They were passing the rectangular concrete building, and as they turned a corner Simon saw rows of sooty wheeled cages, like skeleton freight cars, on short lengths of track which ran into black tunnels in the base of the building. There were heavy iron doors that could close the tunnels.

Some of the vans were piled high with logs of all sizes, and others were still empty.

"The wood goes in those cars, and they go into the ovens and get baked. When it comes out, it's charcoal."

They climbed a stairway to the roof of the building, where the confusion of pipes was.

"The smoke goes through various distillations, and it's separated into creosote and light wood oils and wood alcohol. It's all very scientific and industrial, but once the plant's built almost anybody can run it."

"If only the guerillas leave them alone, you mean," Simon remarked.

From the roof of the building, another flight of steps led up to rejoin the steeply graded road that coiled up past the coolie quarters to the house above.

"Yes," she said calmly. "They couldn't steal anything that'd be worth much to them, but they'd get horribly drunk on the alcohol and then anything could happen."

Just beyond the barracks one of the Malays overtook them to open the gate in a nine-foot fence topped with barbed wire which crossed the road and stretched straight around the hill.

"You're now in our inner fortress," she said. "It's locked at night, and patrolled, and we've got floodlights we can turn on, and if the Commies try to attack we can put up quite a fight. But I hope there won't be any of that while you're here."

"I'm not worried," said the Saint. "I've seen it in the movies. The good guys always win."

She did not even seem to be hot when they reached the house and she led the way up the steps to the screen door in the center of the verandah. A little way along one wing of the verandah she opened another door, disclosing a bedroom where the Chinese boy was already unpacking the Saint's bag.

"This is your room," she said. "I hope you'll be comfortable." There was an automatic in a shoulder holster which the boy had taken out of the suitcase and placed neatly on the bedside table. Mrs. Lavis picked it up, examined it cursorily, and handed it to the Saint. "I don't want to sound jittery, but while you're here you ought to get in the habit of not letting this out of reach."

Simon weighed the gun in his hand.

"I hope I won't be just a nuisance to you," he said.

"Not a bit," she said. "I expect you'd like to have a shower and freshen up. Charles Farrast is out with the coolies now, but they'll be knocking off soon. We always meet on the verandah for *stengahs* at six. And whatever you've seen in the movies, we *don't usually* dress for dinner."

"Major Ascony sent you the

usual greetings," Simon remembered, "and he said he'd be coming to see you as soon as he could get away for a few days."

"That'll be nice."

"He told me about your husband having been ill. How's he coming along?"

She turned in the doorway.

"My husband died early this morning, Mr. Templar. That's what I was sending Vernon the wire about. We buried him shortly before you got here. In the tropics you have to do that, you know."

III

By six o'clock it was tolerably cool. The houseboy had asked *"Tuan mau mandi?"* and Simon recalled enough of the language to nod. The boy came back with an enamel pail of hot water and carried it down into the bathroom, a dark cement-walled compartment under the pilings.

Simon stood on a grating and soaped himself with the hot water, and then turned on the shower, which ran only cold water which was not really cold. Even so, it was an improvement on the kind of facilities he had encountered on his first trip upcountry, when the cold water was in a huge earthenware Ali Baba jar and you rinsed off by scooping it out with an old saucepan and pouring it over your head. Arrayed in a clean shirt and slacks he felt ready to cope with anything. Or he hoped he could.

The communal part of the verandah, where he had entered, ran clear through the depth of the building from front to back, forming a wide breezeway which in effect bisected the house into two completely separate wings of rooms. Through the screen door at the back Simon could make out dim outlines of the cook's quarters and kitchen—a separate building, as is the local practice, connected to the rear of the house by a short covered alleyway.

At that end of the breezeway there was a table already set for dinner, but the front three-quarters of the area was furnished as a living room. A man was mixing a drink at the sideboard. He turned and said: "Oh, you must be Templar. My name's Farrast."

They shook hands. Farrast had a big hand but only a medium firm grip. He was almost as tall as the Saint, and seen by himself he would have been taken to have a good powerful physique. But next to the Saint he looked somewhat softer and noticeably thicker in the waist. He was good-looking, but would have looked better still with a fraction less flesh in his face. He had a thin pencil line of mustache and sideburns whose length was a little too plainly exaggerated to be an accident.

"Stengah?" Farrast said.

"Thanks."

Farrast poured for him. He

wore a tee shirt and a native sarong, which the old-timers used to affect for informal evening comfort; but he could not have been past his middle thirties.

They moved towards the front of the verandah with their glasses.

"This is a hell of a time for me to land here," Simon said. "Mrs. Lavis should have wired and put me off."

"That's what I told her," Farrast said. "But the plant has to keep running, and it's not a bad idea to have another white man around, just in case anything happened to me. That was her argument, anyhow."

"She's certainly got herself under control," Simon said. "She must have been with me for half an hour, giving me the two-bit tour and playing the perfect hostess, before she even mentioned that her husband had died and you'd just buried him."

"That would be just like her."

"What sort of a guy was he?"

"A nice fellow."

Simon noted to himself that he did not say "One of the best" or any of the other stereotyped superlatives that might have been expected in the circumstances. He made no comment; but even Farrast seemed to realize that such grudging restraint might be unduly conspicuous, and added: "Made a frightful mess of everything, though. I expect Ascony told you."

"The way I heard it," said the Saint, "he was unlucky enough to be robbed by his partner."

"Unlucky, yes. But he was supposed to be a smart business man. How smart is a fellow who gives anyone—anyone at all—a blank check on everything he owns, and trusts to luck the other fellow won't be tempted? If you ask me, he must have been pretty lucky to make that much money in the first place."

"You didn't believe he was going to make a comeback, then?"

"From a place like this? Not in a thousand years. It's a nice little business, but it couldn't ever put him back where he dropped from. When you come right down to it, popping off the way he did was probably the kindest thing that could have happened to him."

Farrast lifted his glass and drained it.

"You must have been very fond of him," said the Saint expressionlessly, "to have stuck with him like that."

Farrast gave him an odd uncertain glance.

"A job's a job," he said, and went back to the sideboard to pour another drink.

"What will Mrs. Lavis do now?"

"Sell the place, if she has any sense. And the buyer won't get me with it."

"It wouldn't be a job any more?"

"If you want to know all about

it," Farrast said, "I don't have to worry much longer about jobs. In about three more months I'll have a birthday, and I'll come into eighty thousand quid that my old man left in trust for me, and then it's good-bye to this stinking jungle and home to England and the life of a country squire for me."

There was a rustle of skirts along the verandah, and then Eve Lavis was with them. She had put on a very plain cotton dress, cut low but not indiscreetly low in front, with a single strand of pearls around her neck, but with her face and figure and bearing she looked ready to receive royalty. The only incongruous touch was her gun belt; but she was not wearing it. She carried it with her and hung it over the arm of a chair.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I should have been out here first to introduce you."

"We managed," said the Saint.

"How do you feel, Eve?" Farrast asked.

"I feel fine, Charles," she said evenly. "Make me a gin *pahit,* will you?"

Her face was smoothly composed, and her cool gray eyes were dry and bright with no trace of redness or puffiness.

"Is your room all right, Mr. Templar?" she said. "I'm afraid the plumbing's not quite what you're used to; but you should have seen it when Ted and I first came here."

"Everything's fine," he said. "I'm only sorry I had to come at such an unfortunate time."

"It isn't a bit unfortunate. I couldn't help hearing the end of your conversation just now. Of course I'm going to sell the place. But it won't fetch anything like its value if it isn't a going concern. So we've got to keep it running, exactly as if nothing had happened. And having you here will be good for our morale. Sometimes it's good for people to have to keep up appearances."

Farrast brought her a wineglass half full of pink fluid and an ice cube. She took it and glanced at the Saint's glass.

"Will you help yourself whenever you're ready, Mr. Templar?" she said. "Don't wait to be asked. I want you to feel absolutely at home."

"Thank you," said the Saint.

"Charles," she said, "Mr. Templar never even met Ted, you know. So he hasn't suffered any bereavement whatever. So there's no reason why he should have to pretend he's in mourning. For that matter, it isn't your personal tragedy either. Now I'll feel much better if you'll both avoid lowering your voices when I'm around and acting as if I were a kind of bomb that's liable to explode. I assure you I won't, if you'll only stop being so damned concerned about me."

"Right-o, Eve," Farrast said. "If that's how you want it."

There was a light flush on his cheeks and his complexion had become faintly shiny.

Eve Lavis looked at the Saint and at Farrast and at the Saint again. The shift of her eyes was not as pointed as the description sounds, but to the Saint's almost psychic perception it was startling-clear that in her cool detached way she had made a comparison, and the fact that her gaze returned last to him and stayed on him had a very direct implication. Farrast turned and went back to the sideboard and could be heard replenishing his glass again.

"And what kind of justice is the Saint going to bring to Ayer Pahit?" she asked.

"I don't think Major Ascony expects me to do that," Simon said lightly.

"Have you known him long?"

"No. In fact, only since yesterday."

"He said in his wire that he'd just met you, and he thought we'd like you, but I didn't know if he was kidding."

"Would that be his idea of kidding?"

"It might be. He likes to do mysterious things. After all, even I recognized your name, so he must know all about you. I didn't think he'd send you here without some reason."

"I told him I was trying to keep out of mischief, but I put in some time up and down the peninsula a long while ago, when at least there were no guerillas to worry about, and I was curious to see what it was like today."

The houseboy came in and began to light the lamps, and they moved idly towards the front of the verandah.

"We'll show you the rest of the place tomorrow," she said. "Not that there's much to see. But no guerillas, I hope."

Looking down the hill, he could still see the barracks below as blocks of blackness.

"Your coolies seem to be barricaded in already," he remarked. "I suppose being outside the fence they're more nervous."

"No, they're not there at all. Those quarters were built for the Chinese who used to work here. But most of them were scared away when the trouble started, and you couldn't be sure that those who wanted to stay weren't in league with the Reds. Most of the guerillas are Chinese, you know, but most of the Malays hate the Commies. The only Chinese we have now are the cook and the boy and an *amah,* and Ted had had them for years. We're using Malay laborers, from a village a mile away. They don't get half as much work done, but we feel a lot safer with them."

"I wouldn't go on saying that too loud," Farrast put in.

He had sat down on a sofa with his feet up on the coffee table and was flipping over the

pages of an old *Illustrated London News.*

"Why?" Eve Lavis turned. "Is anything wrong?"

"It's been getting worse for several days," Farrast said. "Every day a few more of 'em haven't been showing up, and the ones that do come have been more jittery. Even the excuses are half-hearted. When I got back to the woodcutting gang this afternoon after—after the funeral, more than half of 'em had gone home. Just dropped their tools and wandered off as soon as my back was turned."

"Couldn't the *krani* stop them?"

"They wouldn't pay any attention to him. They only accept him as a foreman when they can see me standing behind him. He said the *pawang* had been talking to them."

"That's their sort of witch-doctor," Mrs. Lavis explained to Simon.

"I think the Commies have converted him, or they've bought him," Farrast said. "Anyway, he's been spouting a mixture of propaganda and mumbo-jumbo. His latest yarn is that the spirits have taken sides against the white colonizers, as witness the way Ted was struck down, and anyone who works for us is due to fall under the same curse."

"They can't possibly fall for that nonsense!"

"I'm afraid they do, my dear. These are jungle Malays, remember, not like the ones you were used to in Singapore. They're as superstitious as any savages."

"Then we'll just have to sell them a better fairy tale, Charles."

"If I catch that *pawang* around tomorrow," Farrast said darkly, "I'm going to take a stick to him, and let 'em see if his spells can do anything about that."

The boy had been bringing in plates of soup and lighting candles on the dining table, and now he stood waiting patiently beside it. Mrs. Lavis put down her empty glass and turned to the Saint again.

"Are you ready?" she said, and put her hand under his arm, so that he had to escort her to the table as formally as if they were going in to a ceremonial banquet.

The soup was chicken. The main dish after it was steamed chicken, to accompany which the boy passed a platter on which was a great mound of rice smothered with successive sprinklings of fried onions, grated coconut, and chopped hard-boiled egg. The rice when dug into proved to be liberally mixed with peanuts and raisins.

"I hope you like it," Mrs. Lavis said. "We're terribly limited in the supplies we can get here, and I can't stand curry more than once a week, though we usually seem to have it at least twice. But we must stop boring you with all our problems."

"That's what I came for," said the Saint cheerfully. "And I've been wanting to taste this dish again for more years than I want to count. I'll make a deal with you. If you don't want us fussing over you, will you stop apologizing to me?"

Her face lighted with a more spontaneous smile than he had seen on it yet.

"You're absolutely right. I promise I won't do it again."

Thereafter the conversation was as unstrained as it could be amongst a threesome of whom one was a virtual stranger. Even Farrast relaxed from the dour mood which had started to overtake him sufficiently to ask some questions about London, which he had not seen for four years. But he drank another highball with his meal, and his face seemed to become a little ruddier and shinier, while in repose the sullen cast of his brow became more pronounced and a surly undertone always seemed ready to edge into his voice.

Simon diagnosed him as a man of uncertain and violent temper who had probably made no little trouble for himself with it in his time, and was careful to avoid being drawn into any argument.

Eve Lavis became more of an enigma to him as the time went on. In every technical detail she was a perfect hostess. She was unfailingly ready with the anticipation, the interjection, or the explanation that would save the stranger from an instant's embarrassment or perplexity or a feeling of being left out. Yet that very perfection of poise and graciousness might have made someone less relaxed than the Saint uncomfortably conscious of his own gaucheness.

She was a good and appreciative listener, and yet her complete attentiveness could seem exacting, as if she required in return that what the speaker was saying should be informative or intelligent or witty enough to justify the attention she gave it. There was no suggestion that she would cease to be polite if you failed to measure up to her, but her politeness could be more crushing than anyone else's open contempt. The proof that she could live up to her own standards was in the fact that Simon had to keep reminding himself that her husband had died that morning and been buried that afternoon.

The Saint had been trying to guess her age. She wore no make-up except lipstick, but not even the closest scrutiny would support a guess as high as thirty. The combination of such poise and self-control with such youth was almost frightening, and yet at the same time strangely exciting.

After dinner they adjourned to the front part of the breezeway for coffee, and Mrs. Lavis was pouring it when a sound of footsteps and voices approaching

made them all silent in sudden tension. In a moment she resumed pouring without a tremor, but her eyes had flicked once to the holster on the arm of her chair, and Simon had a feeling that thereafter she could have drawn the gun without looking.

Farrast stood up, with a hand on the revolver tucked in the waist fold of his sarong, and went to the front door, standing up to it with his legs truculently apart and his face close to the screen to see out better. The Saint rose quietly and moved only a little to the side, so that if it were needed the gun in his hip pocket would be less obstructed.

One of the rifle-carrying guards came into the overflow of light at the foot of the steps. With him was a very old Malay, wearing nothing but a sarong drawn up under his protruding ribs. The old man hung back as they approached and squatted down, tucking the sarong between his skinny legs.

The guard looked up and said: *"Tabeh, tuan. Itu penggulu mau chakap Mem."*

"You talk to him, Charles," Mrs. Lavis said. "It's better if they have to talk to a man."

She put down the coffee pot and picked up a cigarette. Simon struck a match for her.

"It's the *penggulu*—the headman of the village where our labor comes from," she said.

The *penggulu* had stood up again and was talking lengthily in a plaintive singsong. When his mouth was open it showed only three teeth, with no apparent relationship between them.

"Can you understand him?" Mrs. Lavis asked.

"My Malay's pretty rusty," said the Saint. "Just a few words come back to me now and then."

"At the moment he's just saying how wonderful my husband was and how sorry he is for me."

Farrast said something impatient, promptingly, and the *penggulu* launched out on another extensive speech.

"Now he's getting to the point," Mrs. Lavis said. She listened with her head bent, staring at the end of her cigarette when she was not putting it to her mouth. "His people have got out of hand, they don't respect him any more, they mock him when he tries to assert his authority . . . They don't want to work for us any more. He would like to make them work, but he is a feeble old man and they laugh at him . . . The *pawang* has taught them to do this . . . The *pawang* has told everyone that if they go on working for us the guerillas will come after them, and the demons will haunt them, and none of them will escape. The *pawang*—"

Farrast roared in sudden anger: *"Mana bulih!"*

"And that," Mrs. Lavis said, "is what I think Americans mean

when they use the strongest adjective in the dictionary."

Farrast was still shouting indignantly in Malay, and no interpreter was needed to convey the idea that he was profanely inquiring whether the *penggulu* was a man or a mouse and why the hell didn't he get another *pawang*.

The *penggulu* heard him out respectfully, and then embarked on another long quavering apologia.

Farrast turned his head.

"What shall I tell him, Eve?"

"You should know better than I, Charles," she said steadily. "You're in charge now. Make your own decision."

Farrast turned again with his under lip jutting. He interrupted the old man with another tirade in Malay, but this one had a harsher finality. Mrs. Lavis stirred her demitasse and drank some of it.

Farrast swung around on his heel and rejoined them at the coffee table. He picked up his cup, deliberately keeping his back turned to the steps. The *penggulu* stood outside still looking up, mumbling despondently. After a moment the guard unslung his rifle and prodded the *penggulu* with it, not ungently. The old man turned slowly and shuffled away into the darkness, with the guard following him.

"Well, that ought to settle something," Farrast said.

"What did you say to him?" Simon asked.

"I told him that I'd expect a full crew on the job tomorrow, and if I didn't get it I'd come looking for the *pawang* and personally beat him to a pulp, and he could tell his precious *pawang* that with my compliments."

Mrs. Lavis finished her coffee.

"I hope that was right," she said impersonally, and stood up. "I think I'll go to bed now, if you'll excuse me. It's been a long day, and I was up most of last night."

She gave Simon a friendly smile all to himself.

"I'll see you at breakfast," she said. "And I hope you sleep well."

"Goodnight," said the Saint, hardly capable of being amazed any more. "And the same to you."

Farrast made another of his trips to the sideboard.

"Care for a nightcap?" he asked shortly. "We don't stay up late here. Have to get up too early in the morning."

"I don't think so, thanks," Simon said pleasantly. "I wouldn't mind catching up on some sleep myself."

"Night-night, then," Farrast said.

"See you tomorrow."

The Saint sauntered away to his room.

He stripped down to his shorts, brushed his teeth, and

then lighted a last cigarette, enjoying the taste of it on his freshened palate. He paced soundlessly up and down the polished hardwood floor in his bare feet, trying to put his impressions in some sort of order.

He had met an extraordinary woman and a more ordinary man of a type that he felt he could easily learn to dislike. But beyond observing and trying to analyze them as personalities, he did not know what he should have been looking for. It was frustrating that he had arrived just too late to form his own impression of the third member of the triangle. He thought of it unconsciously as a triangle, and only after he had done so was aware that his intuition had already drawn one conclusion.

He heard Farrast walk heavily past and open a door further down the verandah, and then he heard him through the partition wall. Farrast, then, had the adjoining room to his, and the other wing of the house would be the master suite. The wall was not much of a sound insulator. Simon heard Farrast moving about, opening drawers and closets, getting ready for bed, and presently the fall of his slippers and the creak of springs.

The Saint put out his cigarette, took off his shorts, lay down quietly, and turned out the lamp. But for some time he lay with his hands behind his head and his eyes open, staring up at the ceiling.

When two people have slept together, there is a kind of transmutation betwen them which, no matter how carefully they behave, without a single false step that could be specifically pinpointed, can reveal the fact to a sensitized intuition as baldly as if it were branded on them.

The Saint dozed.

Presently, he judged it was about half an hour later, he was wide awake again, and the sound that had aroused him was still clear in his recollection. It had been the creak of a board outside on the verandah. Instinctively he dropped one hand to the butt of the automatic which he had tucked under the edge of the mattress, but he made no other movement, and made himself breathe regularly and heavily. And after a few seconds he heard the almost inaudible scuff of stealthy footsteps moving away. That was when he let go the gun again, for his praeternaturally acute hearing told him that the feet were shod.

It was hard to follow them very far: the surrounding night crowded in on his ears with its competing antiphony of innumerable frogs and insects and small beasts of unimaginable variety, a background orchestration that you could forget entirely until you wanted to listen for something else and then it seemed to swell up into deafening volume.

But after a while he heard, with unmistakable clarity, the soft turning of a latch, and perhaps felt rather than heard, conducted through the joists of the building, the muffled closing of a door, far down in the other wing of the house.

He went to sleep.

When he woke up again it was as if his brain had not stopped working. It was daylight enough to read, and he reached out at once for the book on the bedside table. He could not wait any longer to find out what Major Ascony had wanted him to read in it. But it was a very thick book, and to work through it from the first page in the hope of coming upon something that might fit in would be a marathon task.

He riffled the pages methodically in search of a clue, and suddenly came to one that was turned down at the upper corner. It was a very neat turn-down, far smaller than the diagonal half of a postage stamp, but it was the only one in the volume, and it was on the first page of a story. He had a feeling that Ascony might almost have measured it with a micrometer, making it just big enough not to be overlooked permanently, but small enough not to be found prematurely.

The story was called *Footprints in the Jungle*. As he started on it he had a vague recollection of having read it before, and as he went on it all came back to him. It was about a woman whose lover, with her encouragement, murdered her husband, and then married her.

IV

When he went out on the verandah he carried the book with him. Eve Lavis was sitting at the coffee table in the living area, sipping a cup of tea. She looked up with a ready smile and said: "Good morning. Did you sleep all right?"

"Like a baby. No, that's wrong. Babies wake up at ungodly hours, bawling their heads off. I didn't."

She was wearing light tan jodhpurs and a pastel yellow shirt, and her ash-blonde hair was pulled plainly back and tied with a yellow ribbon on the nape of her neck. It made her look even younger than the day before. Her gray eyes were clear and unshadowed.

"I don't need to ask you how you feel," he said. "You look merely wonderful."

"I can't help that. But I'm afraid it shocks you."

"It shouldn't. I ought to know better than anyone that death seems a little less important each time you see it."

"You mean that this isn't the first husband I've lost and I'm getting hardened to it."

"Well, Ascony did mention

the doctor. But he didn't go into any details."

"Dr. Quarry," she said. "Donald Quarry. He committed suicide."

"You don't have to talk about it, if you'd prefer not to."

"I don't mind. You're curious, aren't you? It's natural. I was on a cruise boat that stopped here. It suddenly came over me that if I had to make one more sightseeing trip with the same crowd of people saying the same things about everything I'd go out of my mind. I decided to drive out to the Golf Club and ask if they'd let me play a round and be by myself for the first time for weeks. They were very obliging about it.

"But I met Donald on the first tee and we played the round together, and then we had drinks, and he asked me to dinner, and it was something at first sight, I suppose, and when the cruise boat went on I wasn't on it. We were married for two years. And then he did an operation that went wrong and his patient died. I don't know why, but he got very depressed and thought he was no good any more, and soon afterwards he took a shot of morphine and put himself to sleep. I think I cried a little that time."

Simon looked down the hill, across the railroad tracks to the dense greenness that reached back towards a horizon of blue haze. The damp air still had a deceptively spring-like freshness.

"The first time is always the worst, isn't it?" he said.

"You really do understand," she said.

"If you won't accuse me of going back on our pact, Mrs. Lavis, I think you may be the most remarkable woman I've ever met."

She was pleased, and did not pretend to hide it.

"I'm glad you came here," she said. "And I think you could drop the 'Mrs. Lavis' stuff. Do you mind if I call you Simon?"

"I was waiting for a chance to suggest it, Eve."

She put a hand on the teapot to test its temperature.

"Would you like a cup of tea? It's still hot."

"I'd rather have breakfast. I'm the horribly healthy type."

She glanced at a clock across the room.

"We'll give Charles another five minutes, and then I'll ring for it, whether he's here or not."

He was still trying to visualize her in bed with Farrast. There was nothing prurient about the effort: it was more like an exercise in abstract mathematics. Intellectually, he had no doubt left that his assumption was correct; but to translate it into a picture that he could believe empathically was a form of confirmation that eluded him. Could that invulnerable air-conditioned poise

really melt in the warm confusion of sex, abdicating its pedestal to lie with a cheaply handsome, spoiled, wilful, and surely less than fascinating mortal like Charles Farrast?

"Isn't he up yet?" Simon asked.

"Good heavens, yes. We literally get up at the crack of dawn here. *Ketchil makan,* and out to get the coolies started at six o'clock. Then back to breakfast after everything's running."

He still had the book in his hand as he sat down beside her, and he put it down on the table in front of him.

"I didn't know how long it might be till breakfast, and I didn't know I'd have better company," he explained.

She leaned a little towards him to look at the title.

"Maugham," she said. "I don't think I know that one. Is it new?"

"No, it's a collection. Ascony lent it to me."

"Vernon? I never thought of him as the bookish type."

"He said there was a story in it that he'd like to get my reaction to."

"Really? Which one?"

"A thing called *Footprints in the Jungle.*"

She passed him a tin of cigarettes and took one herself.

"What's it about?"

"Well, Maugham never does go in for very sensational plots, and this one certainly isn't the newest one in the world. It's about a woman whose husband is murdered, supposedly by robbers, and soon afterwards she marries his best friend, and the presumption is that they were the ones who actually arranged to knock off Hubby."

She took a light from the match he held, without a wrinkle in her smooth brow. She was enjoying a civilized conversation, nothing more.

"It isn't exactly original, is it?"

"It's all in the writing. He makes you see them as quite ordinary people that you might meet anywhere, instead of monsters out of another world."

"But I wonder why Vernon wanted your opinion of it."

"The inside story is supposedly told by a police chief," he said. "The policeman finds enough evidence to be fairly convinced that they did it, but he also knows that he could never get enough to stand any chance of convicting them. So he's never done anything about it."

She met his gaze with level, untroubled eyes.

"I wonder if Vernon has a problem of that kind and can't make up his mind what to do. But I can't imagine Vernon not being able to make up his own mind about anything. But of course, if he didn't have enough evidence, there's nothing he *could* do anyway, is there?"

Simon shrugged his shoulders.

"He didn't tell me anything, and I didn't read the story until this morning."

"I'll have to read it myself." She glanced at the clock, and stood up. "Let's not starve ourselves any longer."

She went to the dining table and rang the silver hand bell that stood in front of her place; but they had hardly settled themselves when Farrast stomped up the front steps and shouldered blusteringly through the screen door.

"Sorry if I'm late," he said perfunctorily.

He sailed a terai hat into an armchair as he marched through to the table and sat himself down heavily, his boots scraping the floor. He had the kind of complexion on which sunburn never loses all its redness, and it seemed more inflamed now, perhaps because he was warm. His khaki shirt was already wilted and clinging.

"Trouble?" Eve Lavis asked.

"Plenty," Farrast said. "And I'm going to make more."

"You'll be able to do it better with a good breakfast under your belt," she said practically.

It was a good breakfast, staunchly British, with bacon and eggs and sausages and toast and marmalade and strong tea to wash it down, as was to be expected, for that is one tradition on which no proper Colonial even in the remotest outpost of the Empire would make any concession to local cuisine. At other meals he may without protest eat bird's-nest soup or stewed buffalo hump, and may even become an addict of semi-incandescent curries; but breakfast under the British flag is incorruptible from Hampstead to Hong Kong.

After the boy had finished serving and gone out, and they had started eating, Farrast said: "I went down to the plant. The *krani* was there, but no men. They were supposed to clean out a couple of the stills. I waited twenty minutes. Then I loaded him in the jeep and drove out where they were last cutting wood. The other *krani* was there, with a truck, but no men. I gave it another ten minutes. Nobody showed up. So you know what I did? I made the *kranis* pick up a saw and start cutting wood themselves. I said if they couldn't get their crews on the job, the only way they could earn their pay was by doing it themselves."

"Do you think that was wise, Charles?" Mrs. Lavis asked. "You want to keep them on your side."

"You told me last night to show who was boss," Farrast answered belligerently. "If the *kranis* had been tougher themselves, perhaps we'd never have had this trouble. This ought to teach 'em a lesson. I told 'em not to come in till they could bring

the truck full of wood, which is all we need to complete a batch that's waiting to be baked. And then I hiked off to the Malay village."

"By yourself?"

"No, I had a friend with me." He drew his revolver, held it up for a moment, and thrust it back in the holster. "I was just hoping somebody *would* start something, so I'd be given a chance to use it. But when I got there there wasn't a grown man in sight. They'd all sneaked off into the bush when they heard me coming. Except the *penggulu*."

Mrs. Lavis frowned at him.

"Poor old man! I hope you didn't hurt him."

"I made him show me the *pawang's* hut. I threw everything out of it that was movable, his personal possessions as well as his charms and concoctions — broke everything that was breakable, and trampled the whole shebang into the mud. Then I told him to see that all the men saw it when they came back, and he could ask 'em how they thought the *pawang's* magic could be any good if I could do that to him. And I told him to give the *pawang* a mesage, in front of plenty of witnesses, that I dared him to show his face anywhere around the estate, because wherever I found him I'd give him a public thrashing."

Eve Lavis buttered some toast. "Well, that ought to lead to a showdown," she said. "What do you think, Simon?"

"I don't see how the *pawang* can help losing face if he doesn't do something about it," said the Saint. "On the other hand, if he does something, it's liable to be something unhealthy for you, Charles."

"Don't worry about me, Templar," Farrast said. "I'm pretty handy at taking care of myself."

Mrs. Lavis frowned thoughtfully.

"I can't help wondering if we aren't missing the target," she said. "You said yourself that the *pawang* must have gone over to the Reds. Doesn't that mean there must be a bigger Commie agent somewhere around here who's giving him his orders? If you could find him, you'd get the trouble out by the root."

"Perhaps Templar can detect him," Farrast said.

"I'll think about it," Simon said amiably. "But with your local knowledge you'd do it better. I think Eve's got something, though."

"Well," Farrast said grudgingly, "if I catch that *pawang* I'll see what I can beat out of him."

They had finished eating and were smoking cigarettes at the table when one of the guards came up the verandah steps and knocked on the frame of the screen door. Farrast got up and went over there, and the guard spoke briefly.

"He says the *pawang* and a couple of his pals are in the Chinese shop across from the station," Mrs. Lavis translated to Simon.

Farrast returned to pick up his hat, and also a stout Malacca cane.

"This is what I've been looking forward to," he said grimly.

Simon folded his napkin and stood up.

"Would you like me to come with you?" he asked.

"Suit yourself."

Farrast opened the door and went out. Simon followed him.

The tropical day was getting into its stride, and as they stepped out from under the shade of the roof the sun hit them through a mugginess that was almost palpable. Farrast marched down the hill in ominous silence, the set of his jaw proclaiming one implacable preoccupation. But at the gate in the fence that ringed the upper part of the hill he stopped the guard and told him to wait there.

"*Jaga baik-baik, tuan,*" the guard said; and Farrast glared at him as if the man had insulted him by merely urging him to be careful.

They went on down past the plant and the warehouse and across the station platform, without another word being spoken until they had crossed the tracks. Then Farrast stopped a few yards from the open entrance of the store and looked carefully to left and right, as though satisfying himself that he was not walking into an ambush.

He said: "You can come in with me if you like. But don't interfere unless you're quite sure that I've had it. I'm the fellow who's got to go on running this show. They've got to be afraid of me all by myself, and not thinking they can start up again as soon as you've left."

"Whatever you say, Boss," murmured the Saint.

Farrast went in, and Simon followed again and stepped off to one side, keeping his back to the wall.

There were three Malays gathered around an antique pinball machine at the rear of the shop. Two of them, with bottles in their hands, were watching and boisterously encouraging the third, who was playing. But as Simon and Farrast walked in they abruptly stopped laughing; one of them muttered a warning, and they stepped back a little. The one who was playing seemed to pay no attention. He remained huddled closely over the machine, without looking around, concentrating intently on his shot. He could only have been the *pawang,* though he was dressed no differently from the others, in a much-mended shirt and a sarong.

Farrast strode straight over to him, without hesitation, his boots

thudding on the bare floor in defiant announcement of his approach; but the third Malay did not move until Farrast grasped his shoulder. Then the *pawang* turned, like a twisting snake, and a *kris* flashed in his hand at waist level where he must have been holding it all the time under cover of his crouch at the machine.

Simon saw the glint of the wicked wavy-bladed knife, but the Malay was so quick and Farrast was so close to him that even the Saint could have done nothing about it. But Farrast himself must have been anticipating the attack in precisely the way it happened, and he was countering it almost before it started, pushing the Malay back and bringing his already lifted cane down in a vicious cracking blow on the man's wrist which undoubtedly broke a bone. The knife fell to the ground and Farrast put his foot on it. Then he grasped the *pawang* by the collar and began to rain merciless blows with the stick on his back and buttocks.

The *pawang's* attempt had been made and foiled so instantaneously that it hardly seemed like an interruption at all, and his two putative sycophants were left winded and dumbfounded by the speed with which their prospective hero had been disarmed and reduced to squirming impotence. Simon kept them under close observation, but it was obvious that their rôle had been meant to be that of witnesses and admirers, and that they had no ambition to join the fray after the tables had been so catastrophically turned on their champion.

They watched open-mouthed, until with a scream and a still more violent plunge the *pawang* tore himself free, leaving half his patched shirt in Farrast's hand, and raced out of the shop like a terrified cur; and then, as Farrast turned speculatively towards them, they sidled around behind a counter with increasing velocity that culminated in a panic-stricken bolt for the door.

Farrast picked up the *kris* and examined it.

"This'll make a nice souvenir," he said.

"You earned it," said the Saint, who could seldom withhold approbation when it was due. "When I saw him pull it I thought he had you, but you handled him like a Commando."

Farrast looked pleased with himself, rather than with the compliment.

"I told you I could take care of myself."

They went outside again. All three Malays had disappeared.

"Two of 'em are on their way back to the village to tell the story right now," Farrast said. "I don't think the *pawang* will have much prestige left when they've finished. In fact, I'll be

surprised if he ever shows his face in Pahang again."

"Unfortunately," Simon remarked, "you didn't get a chance to ask him who he was taking orders from, after all."

"Probably it doesn't matter much now."

Farrast squinted up at a haze of dust drifting around the shoulder of the hill.

"Those *kranis* have brought the truck in," he said. "I hope for their sakes it was full of wood."

He started to walk briskly up towards the distillation building, and the Saint tagged quietly along. Farrast swung his cane as if he was enjoying the feel of his recent use of it in retrospect, and would be happy to repeat the experience. His lower lip began to tighten and protrude again.

The truck had pulled into the loading area in front of the ovens, where the cage-like carts received their cargoes of raw wood. The two *kranis* were heaving billets from the truck into the last car of a row of previously filled ones. They were Tamils, and they had started the day in white shirts and trousers as befitted their position as supervisors of common labor, but now their clothes were soiled and soaked with sweat. They did not look at Farrast or the Saint, but went on working steadily, with masks of undying resentment on their thin-featured black faces.

Farrast measured the size of the load they were handling with his eye, and seemed disappointed that he could find no fault with it.

"I've good news for you," he said in English. "I think I've fixed the *pawang* and you'll have all your men back tomorrow morning. But I don't want this to happen again. So to make sure you remember what happens when you let 'em get out of hand, I'm going to let you fill in for 'em for the rest of the day. After you finish loading that train we'll run it in and start cooking, and you can try yourselves out as stokers. Then this afternoon we'll go back to the coils and tanks that your men were supposed to clean. Between you, you ought to be able to make up some of the time that's been lost. And I'm going to watch you do it. Unless you'd rather go back to India and look for another job."

The two men stood still for long enough to appraise him with inscrutable faces of sweat-glazed jade, and then stolidly resumed their work.

"Those two speak English as well as I do," Farrast said carelessly, "but they still need a bit of educating."

He found himself a place in the shade, sat down, and played with the captured *kris*.

Simon Templar lighted a cigarette and wandered idly around, finding what he could to interest

himself. Farrast was plainly no casual conversationalist, and was content to glower intermittently at the toiling *kranis* and watch for the next excuse to lay a verbal lash across their backs. Simon found himself liking Farrast not one particle better, even though the man had surprised him with a demonstration of physical courage and capability of no insignificant order. It was a revelation that a form of genuine respect could be so sharply limited.

The Saint endured Farrast's inexorable dourness until his last three cigarettes were smoked and he could stand it no longer, and then he said: "Eve must still be wondering what happened. I'll go back and tell her how you smote the ungodly, hip and thigh."

"Go ahead," Farrast said curtly, and glanced at his watch. "I'll be along soon for tiffin."

Eve Lavis was sitting on the verandah with the Maugham book open on her lap. She looked up at Simon with eager but restrained concern.

"What happened? You have been such a long time."

"I know, I should have come back before. I was watching them getting ready to run a load of wood through the cook-shop. The *pawang* was taken care of long ago."

He gave her a sufficiently graphic account of one of the few brawls in which he had ever been an entirely superfluous spectator.

"Farrast was terrific," he said. "I can be very frank now, and admit that I hadn't expected that much from him. You know how one tends to think that a guy who makes a lot of threatening noise, which Farrast is rather inclined to, won't be half so tough when the time comes to deliver. This was an eye-opener. Maybe he was a bit brutal, but he was quick as lightning and he was all guts."

"I can't blame you for not liking him. He's been quite boorish with you—I can't think why."

"We haven't exactly become bosom pals yet," Simon acknowledged tolerantly. "But I'll give him a testimonial any day for courage. It gave me a rather different slant on his character. You can tell a hell of a lot about a man's character from a few minutes like those."

"You've probably had lots of practice."

"All right, from the criminal point of view: Suppose Farrast had an enemy, or someone he wanted to get rid of. Farrast would probably challenge him to a fight, or at least give him some token chance to defend himself. Suppose Farrast were a murder suspect. I might believe it if they said he met the victim face to face and shot him down. I wouldn't believe that he slowly poisoned him to death."

She stared at him, her eyes widening fractionally.

"What an extraordinary thing to say!"

"Why? Poisoning is the most cowardly kind of murder. No killer feels as sure as a poisoner that he can't be caught. And it's the easiest thing to do to someone who trusts him. Even the lowest gangsters have hardly ever sunk to using poison. The victim does not even have a chance to duck."

"No, no," she said, with the nearest he had yet seen her come to impatience. "I mean, why would you ever think of Charles as a murderer?"

Simon grinned.

"Force of habit," he said blandly. "I think of all sorts of people like that. It's like a game. And maybe the stuff I've been reading set me off again."

It was a moment more before the shadow of a frown ironed itself out of her forehead and she looked down at the book.

"Oh, yes, I read your story, and I went on and read several others."

He lighted a cigarette.

"What did you think of it?"

"It wasn't bad. And nobody's poisoned in it, either."

"That's true."

"I still can't imagine what Vernon has on his mind."

"Maybe he has his views on what the policeman in the story ought to have done, or would have done according to regulations, and he wants to have an argument with me."

"But what *could* the policeman do?"

Simon shrugged.

"Damn if I know. In that particular case, I don't even know what I'd do myself. It was such a private, almost humane little murder."

"I thought you'd be understanding about that," Mrs. Lavis said.

"I might be. But a callous murder for profit is something else. For instance, take the Bluebeard type. I met one of those not too long ago, in England. He married one woman after another, taking care they had money or insuring them if they didn't, murdered them in a number of ingenious ways, and after a decent interval went on the woo for the next. It was a completely coldblooded business operation." *

"And you couldn't have any sympathy for him."

"I helped to get him hanged," said the Saint.

She closed the book and put it on the table, and studied him again with those sober and profound gray eyes.

"I like you very much," she said. "You know exactly what you believe and what you'd do about it. If we got to know each other better we might disagree

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*THE TALENTED HUSBAND, Saint Magazine, July '54.

about lots of things, but we'd always speak the same language."

He knew it for as open a promise of eventually more than friendship as any strumpet's moist mouth and skillfully disarranged skirt, but it was made with such queenly dignity and for such a discreetly indefinite future that even at her last husband's funeral it would have been in perfect taste.

"Coming from you, Eve," Simon said quietly, "I take that as a rare compliment."

Farrast came tramping up the steps and kicked the screen door open with an exuberant toe.

"Well, Eve," he said, "should I put in for a raise?"

She stood up, her face lighting with eager appreciation.

"Simon told me all about it," she said. "You must have been wonderful."

"I told you I'd do it," Farrast said, flinging down his hat and cane. "And the two *kranis* are learning how much better it is to keep other people working than have to do it yourself. When the Malays come back tomorrow morning, everything will be running like clockwork again."

He was flushed and hot, but the satisfaction of meting out punishment seemed to have finally put him in a good humor.

"I'm going to have a drink," he announced, and went to the sideboard.

Eve turned to the Saint.

"Aren't you thirsty?" she said.

"I could use a cold beer, if you have one."

"Of course."

She rang the bell on the dining table; and the houseboy came in, took the order, and went out again. Farrast raised his glass.

"Excuse me if I don't wait," he said. "Cheerio."

He drank deeply, putting down two-thirds of the highball at one long draft. As he lowered the glass, a strange expression came over his face, and quickly turned into a dreadful grimace. He retched and choked, and then doubled up as if he had been hit in the solar plexus. The glass fell from his hand as he clutched his stomach, and then his knees buckled under him.

Eve Lavis gave an inarticulate cry.

Simon sprang forward and rolled Farrast over. Farrast's muscles were cramped in knotted rigidity, his teeth were clenched and his lips drawn back from them in a horrible grin. The color of his face was darkening towards purple. Simon tried to force the mouth open so that he could physically induce vomiting, but he knew it was no use.

V

"Those devils," Mrs. Lavis said, in a clear unnatural voice.

Charles Farrast was finished. Technically there might still have

been a flutter of pulse or breath to quibble about, but he was dead beyond human reversing. Nevertheless the Saint went on trying for a few seconds, stubbornly reluctant to give up.

He heard Eve's footsteps cross the room, pause, and then pass quickly behind him. The rear screen door slammed.

Simon looked up, puzzledly. And then from the direction of the cook's quarters out back he heard a man's wordless yell, which was instantly cut off by the first of two crashing shots.

The Saint took off from the floor like a sprinter from a crouch, plunged through the rear door, and raced down the covered alley outside, his automatic already out in his hand.

He saw Eve Lavis through the first doorway he came to; and a moment later, as he braked his headlong rush, the picture was completed. The room was a sort of serving pantry, with china cabinets and an icebox. On a table in the center stood an empty beer bottle, and a freshly filled glass on a Benares tray. The houseboy lay on the floor, quite still, with his eyes rolled upwards and two holes marring the front of his immaculate white jacket. Mrs. Lavis held her revolver still pointing at him, as though considering whether to fire it again.

"I knew it," she said in a flat mechanical tone. "I knew it. It came to me one-two-three. It couldn't have been anyone else. And then if he poisoned the whiskey he could have been slowly poisoning Ted all that time, and perhaps he didn't have ulcers at all. And then if he was poisoning people like that why should he stop there? I could see it all in a flash. I grabbed my gun and ran out here. I caught him redhanded. Just as I thought, he was pouring something into your beer. And when he saw that I'd seen him, he picked up that knife. Look."

Her gun pointed, at a small brown bottle on the floor by the houseboy's feet, and a kitchen knife near his right hand.

There was a faint scuffling sound from the back of the building, and Eve Lavis turned abruptly and hurried out of the door. Simon went after her. A fat Chinese and a little woman were galloping wildly away down a stretch of slope. From their clothes and appearance, they could only have been the cook and the amah.

Eve raised her revolver.

"I'll kill them all," she said coldly.

Simon caught her wrist in a grip of steel.

"You don't know that they had anything to do with it," he said. "The boy was the one you caught in the act. They're probably just scared to death."

He took the gun away from her without much difficulty. She

struggled only very briefly, until her complete helplessness against his strength was obvious. Then she became still, and presently sagged a little against him.

"I'll be good," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Come back to the house," he said.

As he took her through the rear door again she averted her eyes from the body of Farrast on the floor. Simon let her go, and took a napkin to lay over the man's congested face. She sat down in a chair and put her hands over her eyes; but it was a rigid gesture suggestive of intense concentration rather than collapse.

Other footsteps came pell-mell to the front of the verandah. The uniformed guard appeared at the top of the steps, with the staring faces of the two *kranis* a little below and behind him. Simon went and let them in. He recalled what Farrast had said about the Tamils having learned English, and was grateful that he did not have to struggle through a narrative in halting Malay. He stated what he had seen for himself, and what Mrs. Lavis had told him, lucidly and concisely; and one of the *kranis* translated it for the guard. Mrs. Lavis did not move or speak.

Then Simon led them through to the back and showed them what was in the serving pantry.

He said to the elder *krani*: "Tell the guard he is to stay here. He must not go in or touch anything. He is to stand at the door, and he is not to let anyone in for any reason—not even myself or the Memsahib. When he is tired, one of the other guards will take his place. This will go on until the police get here."

He returned to the house with the two Tamils, and nodded at the body by the sideboard.

"One of you help me take him to his room."

One of them did so, the other going along to open the door. When they came back, Mrs. Lavis was still sitting where they had left her. The only difference was that she had dropped her hands to the arms of the chair. Simon went to a small desk that stood against one wall, found a sheet of paper, and wrote on it briefly but carefully.

"Send this to Major Ascony in Singapore on the railway telegraph," he said to the *kranis*. "If he can't come himself, he'll have someone sent on the next train from Kuala Lumpur or Ipoh."

"Yes, sir."

"Do it at once," Mrs. Lavis said.

"Yes, *Mem*."

The *kranis* went out.

Simon paced thoughtfully back, picked up the round yellow tin of cigarettes from the coffee table, and chose one from it.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Lavis said. "I went off the deep end for a

few minutes. I won't do it again."

Her face was again stoically controlled, her eyes dry and clear and unwavering.

"That's all right," he said. "The stiff upper lip can get slightly petrified if it never lets up."

"It was just too much," she said. "Ted swore by that boy Ah Fong. It was so true what you said about poisoning, how mean it is. To think that Ah Fong could have been bringing him poisoned food and drinks day after day, watching him suffer and waste away, all the time pretending to be so sympathetic . . ."

"You're quite sure he was doing that?"

"If Ted was being poisoned, it'll show in an autopsy, won't it?"

"Probably." Simon looked around for a match. "But if Ah Fong took so long over your husband, being so subtle and trying to make it look like natural causes, why did he suddenly decide to knock off Farrast in one dose that nobody could mistake for anything but what it was?"

"Remember what Charles did to the *pawang*. It was a setback to the whole Red operation in this district. They were furious, and desperate. They had to show the Malays at once that nobody could beat up a Commie and get away with it. And they'd have given it to you at the same time just because you'd been with Charles."

"But it wasn't at the same time," Simon pointed out. "Ah Fong saw Farrast mixing a drink when he took the order for my beer. Why would he think it was any use poisoning the beer, when Farrast would have started his drink before I got mine, and after what happened to him I obviously wouldn't drink anything?"

"He must have hoped that Charles would wait for you. Or at least he mightn't have expected Charles to drink so fast. Did you notice how he gulped down most of that drink without stopping? If he'd sipped it like anybody else, there might have been plenty of time for you to get your beer and take a good swig at it before the poison hit Charles."

Simon lighted his cigarette at last, and took a long drag deep into his lungs. He let the smoke out slowly, looking at her quietly through it. He wanted to print her on his memory like that, sitting with her hands folded placidly in her lap, the dainty symmetries of her figure subtly rounding her blouse, the patrician composure of her intelligent upturned face framed against the silver-ash softness of her hair, all the astounding proud loveliness of her as it had become familiar to him feature by feature. He had never known any-

one like her, and he was not likely to again.

"It's no good, Eve," he said. "It's clever, but it won't sell."

The lift of her finely delineated eyebrows was only a flicker.

"I don't understand."

He held the spent match above an ashtray, corrected its position with an estimating eye, and dropped it for a dead-center hit.

"I'm sure," he said, "that you poisoned the whisky. Then, when I was trying to do something for Farrast—as you knew in advance I certainly would be—you rushed out to the pantry and shot Ah Fong. You had the poison bottle in your pocket all ready to drop beside him, and it only took another second to snatch a knife out of a drawer and throw that down beside him too. Who'd make a better fall guy than a Chinese houseboy who was too dead to be able to even try to deny anything?"

For the first time he saw her statuesque calm jarred by a tremor of shock. But even then it was more as if she winced over a breach of good manners that he had been guilty of.

"I don't think that's very funny," she said primly.

"It wasn't meant to be."

"Then the heat must have done something to you."

"I'm only wondering," he said, "what would have happened if I'd decided to join Farrast in a *stengah*. Would you have let me die with him, and framed the houseboy a trifle differently but still shot him before the police got here? Or would you have delayed me, or upset my glass, and saved me somehow so that I could still be a witness? I'm afraid that'll always torment me. You'll never tell me; or if you did, I wouldn't believe you."

She laughed—a little, faint, brittle sound.

"You're very charming," she said. "And would you care to tell me what you think I did it for? Am I a Communist agent?"

"That's one thing I'd never suspect you of. I'm certain you're strictly in business for yourself. You did it mainly to cover up the poisoning of your husband."

"Oh, I did that too?"

"Both of them, as a matter of fact."

Her eyes widened momentarily.

"This is fascinating. It's a good thing I'm not the hysterical type, otherwise I think I'd be screaming."

"Would you like me to run through it from the beginning?"

"You might as well. I couldn't be any more baffled than I am now."

He sat on the arm of a chair and reached over to ease the cylinder of ash off the end of his cigarette.

"I'll only go back as far as the things I've heard about," he said reflectively. "You were on

a world cruise. I've no doubt it was a speculative investment. A cruise of that length is expensive enough to guarantee some fairly well-to-do passengers, and ships are renowned incubators of romance. But for some reason that trip wasn't paying off.

"By the time you got to Singapore you'd methodically investigated all the prospects, and the right man or the right situation just wasn't aboard. So you were not merely bored—you figured you might still get something out of it by doing some prospecting in port. That's why you ducked the sightseeing tour and went to the golf club. And that's where you met Donald Quarry, a doctor with an excellent practice, and it was no problem at all for you to knock him dizzy."

"Thank you."

"Of course, he was only a stepping-stone. Even a very successful doctor could hardly make enough money to be more than that, to a really ambitious woman. But he was an entrée to local society, and a splendid meal ticket until something better came along. And in due course you met Ted Lavis—one of the richest and most successful business men in these parts. So Quarry had to be disposed of. That wasn't hard. You only had to wait until one of his patients died, which happens regularly even to the best doctors, and then start whispering to your friends about how morbidly depressed he was in spite of the brave front he tried to keep up.

"Once that idea had been well planted, it was easy for you to steal some morphine from his supplies and switch it for any other shots that he might be taking. And you already knew you could blitz Lavis as soon as it wouldn't look too blatant—in fact, you'd probably had him on his knees already."

"After all, there's not so much competition in these outlandish places."

"I think you could get almost any man you wanted, anywhere. And you've always known it. But you wanted position and money with him: you were heading for the top. Lavis was a prize. You might have been satisfied with him for a long time. But as Farrast said to me, maybe he really was more lucky then brilliant. Anyhow, he suddenly lost everything, in an amazingly stupid way. You were not only disgusted with him for letting you down, but you were convinced that he was a goose who'd never lay another golden egg. Slow poisoning disguised as intestinal troubles was a neat and plausible way to get rid of him. And meanwhile Charles Farrast had shown up on the scene, with a legacy of eighty thousand pounds waiting for him only a few months away."

"While you're building up this fantastic story," she said, and now she was patiently coping

with a rather tiresome lunatic, "you ought to explain why I have to murder my husbands instead of simply divorcing them."

Simon drew at his cigarette again meditatively.

"I will if you like," he said. "You have a fetish about tidiness and correctness, and a phobia about any kind of emotion—both carried to psychopathic extremes. You couldn't bear to have your reputation soiled with the kind of nastiness you'd have had to admit to give them cause to divorce you, and you'd have died rather than go through the scenes that would have been necessary to make them agree to let you divorce them. Murder, to you, was so much less messy."

She took a cigarette from the tin near her.

"Give me a light, please," she said.

He struck a match and leaned forward with it. She put her cigarette in the flame and brought it to a steady glow.

"Thank you," she said, and took the cigarette from her mouth to exhale with an absolutely smooth and tremorless movement.

Her luminous gray eyes dwelt on him with tremendous absorption, while he lighted another cigarette for himself.

"Now," she said, "about Vernon Ascony."

"He must have thought all along that there was something not quite kosher about Quarry's suicide," said the Saint. "Then, when Ted Lavis was taken sick—not long after losing most of his money—his hunch got stronger. But there was nothing that he could prove, no action that he could take. And he might even be totally wrong. Then I happened to show up in Singapore, and he had a brainstorm. If I spent a little time up here, and there was anything funny going on, I might be able to spot it—if I was looking."

"And the Maugham story was to make sure you looked."

"It wasn't an exact parallel, of course—but that would scarcely have been possible. It was close enough. And maybe it was even better, because if necessary Ascony could always invent some other case and deny that he had you in mind at all . . . He probably had another angle too. He knew you'd recognize who I was, and he figured you might think I was part of a trap, and that might panic you into making a fatal mistake. Which it did."

She frowned.

"You mean like finishing Ted off in a hurry before you got here and saw him? Naturally you wouldn't believe me if I said I didn't."

"That was only the start of it, anyway. The important thing is that it gave you a scare when Ascony asked if he could send me; but you were more scared of

making it look worse if you tried to get out of it. After a little verbal fencing, and reading the Maugham story this morning, you were sure you were in trouble. So was I; but it was still mostly intuition. And at first I couldn't decide what was Farrast's part in the deal. Not even when I heard him go to your bedroom last night."

She half closed her eyes, with a little shudder of distaste.

"Really," she said, "are there any lengths you won't go to?"

"Oh, I don't think you invited him. Not last night, I mean. You'd never be as crude as that. But he could be. And I'm guessing that started you thinking that he was expendable. But after I saw him in action this morning I'd never buy him as a poisoner, and I said so, and you realized it was no use playing with that idea. So you went ahead with Plan B."

"I'm quite certain two people never had a conversation like this before," she said. "But since we're doing it, you'd better finish. What was this fatal mistake I made?"

Simon picked up the gun he had taken from her a little earlier —it was in its holster slung over the other arm of the chair on which he had thoughtfully perched himself—and toyed with it idly.

"The Ah Fong job was the first one you've ever had to do in a hurry," he said. "And anyhow I got out there too quickly for you to have been able to set the stage with your usual care. That's why I posted a guard at the pantry door and told him that nobody, not even me—or you—was to go in there or move anything. I'm betting that when the cops go to work they'll find your fingerprints on the knife Ah Fong was supposed to have attacked you with—"

"Why shouldn't my fingerprints be on a knife in my own house?"

For the first time her voice seemed to rise a little.

"And on the poison bottle beside him—"

"I snatched it out of his hand!"

"I mean *only your fingerprints.*"

There was an absolute silence.

The Saint had shifted his eyes from her before he spoke, and he did not move them back.

A very long time, an eternity, seemed to pass. His cigarette burned down between his fingers, and he put it out.

At last Eve Lavis said, in a very cool, very even voice: "Would you mind if I had a drink?"

He still did not look at her. It was as if an iron hand closed on his heart. Perhaps after all he was an incurable romanticist. In spite of all the statistics, he preferred to think of crime as men's

business. A beautiful woman should be a damsel in distress, for a knight errant to rescue, or a heroine, to ride squarely side by side with him. No man should ever have to meet one like Eve, so lovely and so damned.

"No," said the Saint. "Help yourself."

She stood up, and crossed to the sideboard. He heard her over his shoulder, and the clink of glass and the soft splash of liquid. It made no difference now that the four murders that he knew of were almost certainly not the only ones she had done, that she had very likely started long before she reached Singapore. There was a fathomless pain and anger in him that would never be wholly stilled.

"This," she said, "is to the only man who ever turned me down."

He did not turn his head, he could not, even when he heard her fall.

THE SAINT OFFERS—NEXT MONTH—THESE HEADLINERS

THE WELL-MEANING MAYOR by LESLIE CHARTERIS

DEATH AT MY ELBOW by GEORGE FIELDING ELIOT

THE PRISONER'S BASE by KATHLEEN NORRIS

THE BLUE RAJAH by SAX ROHMER

THE SUNKEN SUITCASE by FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS

WHO'S BUYING MURDER! by WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

DEAD MAN'S MILLIONS by NORMAN DANIELS

alias the killer

by . . . George Harmon Coxe

Denny's nickname was ringed with a blaze of glory — so it didn't at first displease him. But a good cop is never a killer by choice.

LIKE MOST nicknames, this one was born of spontaneity, and friendly regard and it is likely that it would not have survived the Korean battlefront after Dennis Carr left there on a stretcher had it not been for the combat correspondent who used it in a story.

That story told the world how Dennis "Killer" Carr had won the D.S.C. for defending a position in the bleak hills of the peninsula so recklessly that he had, in one afternoon, killed twenty-one of the enemy by the actual count of his superior officer.

Denny didn't know about the dispatch until Nora Marin enclosed the clipping in a letter while he was in the hospital, but when he came home with a patched-up knee that was deemed serviceable enough for a detective in the police department, if not for the Army, he understood how the nickname had preceded him.

Almost from the first, some of his friends in the precinct

To write upwards of thirty novels and a goodly number of short stories may not in itself be a feat Herculean. Other writers have done it and shrugged it off as merely a bread-and-butter necessity that must be taken in stride. But to crash the mystery best seller lists time and time again, with virtually every new triumph—is a horse of another literary color, and one which we're quite amazingly convinced only George Harmon Coxe could successfully corral, mount and ride. And here, firm of stirrup, is one of his most exciting yarns.

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house, and sometimes a cabby or newsboy, called him Killer, and he did not resent it but grinned back because it was not unpleasant to hear and was given in friendliness. To Denny Carr it did not matter whether someone called him "Butch," or "Killer," or simply, "Hi," so long as it was friendly.

It had been like that until two nights ago when he had shot and killed Lee Kranson in the back room of a River Street tavern. Since then, since yesterday morning and McQuillen's piece in the Bulletin, the name had a new and ugly significance.

McQuillen had played it up big. *Killer Carr Does It Again,* is what the piece said. *Slain Suspect Another Notch for Detective's Gun,* McQuillen had said, and down at the bottom of the column he reported that Alderman Ziegler would demand a full and open inquiry.

Now, with the late afternoon sun prying at the shades of the district attorney's office, the inquiry was nearly over. The witnesses—the bartender from the tavern and two men who had been customers at the time—had been excused. Alderman Ziegler, a cousin of Kranson, was shaking his finger at Braim, the district attorney.

"Because this man is a hero," he said, "and got decorated for killing a lot of North Koreans has nothing to do with the murder of Lee Kranson. The fact is, no matter how you try to explain it, no gun was found and I say Lee Kranson did not have a gun."

Braim glanced at Commissioner Cleary and Captain Hague. He sighed and his voice was patient. "We've gone over all that, Mr. Ziegler."

"Furthermore," Ziegler said, "this man is an expert pistol shot. You won the police medal before you went to war, didn't you?" he said to Carr. "Yet in this little room—by your own story you were not over fifteen feet from Kranson—you were not satisfied to wound or cripple him. You shot to kill—at the heart."

Denny Carr tried to be as patient as Braim. "No," he said. "I told you what I did." And he explained again what had happened.

The affair had started out as a routine checkup. The Kranson brothers, Lee and Nate, in the period since they had been expelled from school, had been charged with everything from petty larceny to murder and convicted but once. Now they were wanted for questioning in connection with the fatal shooting of a policeman named McCarthy, who had frustrated the attempted robbery of a wholesale liquor house.

A few nights later, in the guarded, anonymous manner of

most tips, a telephone call came to Denny Carr's home. Because it was late and he did not want to bother Tom Linehan, his partner and a family man, he walked alone into this River Street tavern, glanced at the customers at the bar and, without asking questions, continued to a closed door at the rear.

What happened when he opened that door was clear in a general sort of way, but it was so swiftly done that some of the details were lost.

Of these facts he was sure: There had been three men in the room, two standing near a door leading to the alley and one sitting down within recognition range of the room's single light. This man was Lee Kranson and he jumped up, and ignoring Denny's command, reached into his pocket, backing into the shadows as he did so.

By this time the alley door was open and Denny had no time to stop the two who darted through, for Lee Kranson's arm was moving upward and Denny knew the blur of glistening metal in the hand was a gun.

He saw then what he had to do. He aimed at the upper arm, an easy shot, and squeezed the trigger and it was in that split instant that Kranson, unaccountably, tried to twist aside. Denny knew as the shot hammered through the room that he had not hit the arm. But there was nothing to be done about that now, and when Kranson fell Denny went swiftly past and through the door.

Footsteps rapped faintly in the alley and he ran after them, seeing nothing in the blackness, yet knowing somehow that the two men had split, that one of them was Nate Kranson. He knew, too, that the man he now pursued had too great a start, but he kept on, blindly, until he saw his chase was hopeless.

Lee Kranson was still alive when Denny Carr re-entered the back room. The door to the bar was closed and he stopped to look for the gun before he went out and there was no gun on Kranson or under him or anywhere in the room. The customers and the bartender watched him as he came out. They said no one had come from that room since he had first entered it.

Now, when Denny came out of the district attorney's office, the reporters and photographers covering the inquiry were waiting in the hall. So was Detective Tom Linehan, and that helped a lot, seeing him smile and step through the knot of newsmen to take Denny's arm and say, "Let's go."

Denny Carr wanted to duck away from those flash bulbs and cameras. He watched the faces. Three days ago some would have called him Killer and grinned.

Now they studied him soberly and wanted a story.

He and Tom pushed on past them, saying they'd have to see the district attorney or the commissioner. He didn't want to tell them that Braim said there was no cause for further action, either by his office, or the Grand Jury. He didn't want to talk at all and they saw this and fell back to wait for official word—all but McQuillen.

McQuillen kept pace, a lean, sardonic man who had ulcers and a lingering bitterness in his soul because the Armed Forces wanted no part of him. "I guess they had to whitewash you," he said. "What else could you do with a hero?"

Denny Carr did not trust himself to answer, but went down the steps, holding himself tightly, a compact, sturdy man with dark eyes that were fixed and brooding.

"If you'd been Detective Joe Doakes," McQuillen said, "you'd be lucky to get off with—"

"If he was Joe Doakes," Linehan said, "he wouldn't rate two lines in your lousy sheet . . . Hey, there's Nora."

Nora Marin waved to them from her coupe and Linehan steered Denny toward the open door. McQuillen stuck with them.

"It's okay, Miss Marin," he said. "You can relax. Officially the Killer's record is still spotless."

"Why don't you go away?" Linehan said.

Nora Marin seemed not to hear any of this or to be aware of McQuillen or Linehan. She was wearing slacks and a cardigan; there was a scarf around her dark hair just the way she had come from work, and her eyes were wide and deeply concerned.

"Is it, Denny?" she said. "Is it all right?"

"It's all right."

For an instant she leaned back, all breath gone from her but the smile still there. Then she moved behind the wheel to give him room.

"Your mother asked me for dinner," she said. "She said I could come just the way I am."

Denny swallowed fast. He was strangely embarrassed, afraid to be alone with her just yet, not knowing why. "I—I ought to get back to the station house for a few minutes," he said. "You go along and—"

"What for?"

Denny turned and Linehan was scowling amusedly at him and McQuillen was no longer there.

"Didn't you hear what the lady said?" Linehan added. "Get in." He nudged Denny Carr and then closed the door. "And quit brooding," he said. "It ain't polite."

Mrs. Carr came from the kitchen, bringing the smell of broiling chops with her. She stopped across the living room and for an instant, as Denny glanced at her, her face was drawn and anxious. Then she looked at Nora and smiled quickly and came to kiss her son's cheek.

"What did I tell you?" she said. "How could it be any other way?"

She gave his arm a pat and promptly ignored him for Nora. She wanted to know if that was a new scarf and wasn't it pretty and would Nora like to clean up?

Nora laughed, a quick, relieved sound. She said she was positively filthy and started for the bathroom, while Mrs. Carr went back to the kitchen.

Denny sat down and gradually the tension went from him, gradually his mind adjusted itself and he was grateful for the understanding Tom Linehan and Nora and his mother had shown.

When Nora came back with her skin glowing and her dark hair falling softly about her small, bright face, Denny kissed her red mouth lightly, touched her chin with his fist and kissed her again when she arched her brows at him. It felt like old times, and it felt good.

At dinner they talked of Nora's brothers in the Navy and her work at the factory which made portable radios, and presently the meal was over and nothing had been said about the stories McQuillen had written. Denny helped clear the table and went into the kitchen when the women started the dishes to tell them he was going to the corner for cigarettes.

Then, with no warning, his mother said: "Those stories in the paper won't make any difference, will they, Denny?"

"About what?"

"Well—all that horrid talk about Killer Carr."

She stood with her back to him, and he stared at her, sensing the doubt and uncertainty behind her question.

"Everyone knows that killing all those enemy soldiers was something you had to do," she said. "Just like what happened the other night was something that couldn't be helped. But people won't think you're like that, will they? They—don't call you that to your face?"

Denny stood quite still, a growing stiffness in his back and his palms suddenly damp. Exasperation shook him and his throat felt choked and then there was nothing left but dismay and the knowledge that he must control his voice and pretend her fears were groundless.

"A few do," he said, managing a chuckle. "A cop has to expect things like that. You learn to take it."

The sound of the dishes and silver was loud in the little room

and then it was silent again and his mother said, "I was thinking about Nora. I was wondering if people would—"

Nora Marin cut in quickly. "Oh, but Mother Carr! This will all be forgotten in no time."

His mother sighed. "I don't know what makes me talk like that," she said, her voice contrite. "I'm sorry, Denny. It's the inquiry I guess. Your father was on the police force thirty years and he never had to go through an inquiry and I guess it frightened me."

Denny held himself tightly and, not trusting himself to speak at all, went out and down the stairs and along the street, blindly, cold all over. He got his cigarettes and went around the block and into a bar where the bartender served him without comment and he tried to drink and found he had no taste for whiskey.

The things his mother said—and had not said but implied—still rang loud and clear in his ears, and he stared straight ahead realizing now that of these things one had occurred to him before in the past two days. He had closed his mind against it then, but now, in his despair, he brought it into focus and examined it.

He was Killer Carr and Nora—"Mrs. Killer Carr," he thought. "And some day it might be Killer Carr's son, or daughter."

And it seemed to him now that his mother's fears were right, that it was a name no man could give to the woman he loved. He fashioned the words again with his mind and then he heard the sound of them. Someone had whispered Killer Carr, or so it seemed, and he turned, aware now of the others in the room.

He did not know his scowl was black and morose as he surveyed the row of customers. All he knew was that they seemed to look at him with awe and uncertainty and had, in some way, moved back along the bar so that he stood alone. He stared at them and the room was still and then, because the torment in his mind was getting worse, he turned abruptly and went out.

His mother and Nora were in the living-room. They said he had been gone quite a while and he said he'd stopped to talk with a fellow. He sat down opposite Nora, screwing up his courage to tell her now, right here in front of his mother, that it would be better to break their engagement.

He groped for words with which to phrase his twisted thoughts and looked into her eyes and saw then that there was no doubt in them. Instead, he saw her smile, and the rounded slenderness of her that was so wonderful to hold, and his deter-

mination oozed away and he found his throat was dry.

"Do you want to go somewhere?" he asked.

"If you want to," Nora said.

"Denny," Mrs. Carr laid down her knitting. "Do you think you'd ever want to quit the force?"

He stared at her bewildered. "Quit the force?" he said.

His mother lowered her glance. "I just wondered," she said. "I thought—well, I wondered if maybe some job in a factory—for a while—"

She floundered and stopped. Denny swallowed, hearing Nora's soft gasp, feeling the tightness come about his mouth. Anger struck at him and he fought it and tried to speak reasonably.

"Where'd you get that idea?" he said finally. "The city needs good cops. More now than ever with so much juvenile delinquency. I always figured the better the police department, the better the town and the kids and the people."

He swallowed again and suddenly his anger was gone and he knew that the things his mother had said in the kitchen were a prelude to this.

"And, anyway, I don't know anything else. I never wanted to be anything else," he said, his laugh short and ironic. "I guess you can blame that on Dad. Being a cop was good enough for him.

"Yes," his mother said.

Nora stood up and touched his shoulder. "Crosby and Hope are down at the Bijou in *The Road to Something* or other," she said. "It might be good."

He got up. He said, yes, he'd been wanting to see that one. He got his hat, grateful for the suggestion. It would be dark in the Bijou. No one could see his face and he wouldn't have to talk.

Denny Carr made up his mind about one thing in the sleepless night that followed and when he reported for duty the following day he left his gun at home. He might have gone around like this indefinitely if Captain Hague had not called him into his office two days later and asked to see it.

Denny colored. He said he had forgotten the gun, and privately he wondered if his mother had come across it at home and called Hague, or if she had told Nora.

"Go home and get it," Hague said. 'And see that you carry it. A loaded gun is part of your equipment. Any time you don't want to carry it while you're on duty, you'd better turn in your shield." He hesitated, then accented his words. "And if I were you, I'd quit worrying about Lee Kranson and start thinking about Nate."

Denny Carr had been doing both. He had let it be known where it would do the most good that he would look with approval on any information as to

the whereabouts of Nate Kranson and the third man who was with him that night in the River Street tavern. And though he did not get what he wanted, word came back to him by devious ways that Nate Kranson, in his own fashion, was looking for Denny Carr. Even Tom Linehan heard the rumor.

"Watch yourself," he said. "Those Kranson brothers were in everything together and that Nate is one of them psychopaths."

In a way Denny Carr was thankful for his job. He did not see Nora for three days, nor did he go home until late, and it was easy to explain his absence by saying he was following some new lead or working on some plant.

He could not, however, avoid the things he saw in the daytime. His friends no longer called him Killer but there were others, less kindly-disposed, who found in McQuillen's sniping articles about the inquiry the material for continued taunts.

'Hi, Killer," they'd say, having less animosity for Denny Carr than for the police in general, "when you gonna get another notch for your gun? . . . Who you knocking off this week?" they'd say.

Denny took them tight-lipped and silent. No longer was there laughter in the locker rooms when he was present and he thought there were some who avoided him deliberately. Even Tom Linehan grew silent when his efforts to laugh things off and kid around brought no reaction from the victim.

Not until Saturday did Denny see Nora and then, because this was a date planned long ago, they went out to dinner. Nothing about Nora had changed. She kissed him when she opened the door and sat close to him in the coupe and it was so nice to have her there and hear her quick low laughter that he was ashamed of his broodings and neglect.

Gradually the pressure around his heart melted away. The thing he feared most did not happen. On the street and in the hotel he saw people he knew but no one called him Killer in front of Nora. Afterward at the night club no one spoke to him and they got a table along the wall and when the lights dimmed and a girl came out on the floor to sing, Nora's hand stole into his. Feeling her beside him, the warm softness of her hand, he knew how much he had missed her and was for a little while content.

He paid no attention to the master of ceremonies who came on after the singer. Vaguely he heard the fellow introduce some celebrity and saw a man rise and bow from a table across the room, then the spotlight swiveled back to the emcee.

Denny was watching Nora and liking what he saw and he did not hear what the fellow said until the spotlight suddenly struck him in the face. Then, as though from a great distance he heard his own name and something that sounded like—"Korean war hero and . . . our own police department . . . intrepid, fearless, and a bad man to cross—Killer Carr! There he is, folks, with the lovely little lady in yellow. Stand up, Killer. Take a bow."

The emcee was clapping loudly. A half-hearted ripple of applause could not sustain itself. Denny did not feel Nora's knee nudge his, nor hear her whispered, "Denny!" He heard only a roaring in his ears and could not think or even breathe, and simply sat there with muscles rigid and skin icy, quite powerless to move.

The emcee laughed hollowly. He said, "I guess the Killer is shy as well as deadly," and made some signal with his hand so that the spotlight shifted back to him.

Denny was suddenly shaken and sick inside and the perspiration came quick and cold. Nora took his hand and said, "Why, Denny," and somehow he helped her with her coat and got the check paid and went stumbling out of the room.

It was better in the car. He could breathe again and it was good to drive and hold the wheel hard in his hands. Nora, who had tried at first to talk, was silent now, but he did not notice this and muttered things which even he himself did not understand. Finally he stopped in front of her house and turned off the ignition. Then he said what he had to say; that it was no good going on this way, that what happened tonight was just a sample of what she could expect when she went out with him.

His voice shook. "What I'm saying is, Nora, that when you go out with me people will stare and sometimes you'll hear them whisper and pretty soon you'll know what they're thinking—that I'm a killer."

"Denny." Nora put her hand on his arm and her voice was soft. "When you shot Lee Kranson he had a gun, did he?"

"Yes."

"And those North Koreans," Nora said. "Has that ever been on your conscience?"

"No."

"Have you ever *felt* that you were a killer? That something inside you was different? How *did* you feel, that moment under enemy fire?"

He had gone over all this before in his mind. He thought he knew and he tried now, groping a little for the right words, to explain how it was.

"I didn't feel any different afterward," he said. "I didn't feel anything much at the time, nothing like what you're talking

about, anyway. I was just another guy with an M-1 and some grenades and a Browning I'd got from a guy who didn't need it any more. If I felt anything it was being cold and numb and maybe a little dazed. After we were pulled back and we'd got some sleep and sunshine and baths and hot food we were all right again, those that were left, and the killing was nothing but a hazy something that you knew had happened but you couldn't quite remember."

He stopped, not knowing quite how to go on, and Nora sighed and her voice was still soft. "Yes," she said. "I knew it must be like that. It hasn't hurt you, except maybe for a little while and—"

"It'll hurt you," Denny said and now the hardness was in his voice and in his chest. "It's tough enough for a girl to marry a cop and worry about him, without having to defend him all the time. You know who you'll be if you marry me, don't you?"

"But, Denny—"

"Killer Carr's wife, that's who you'll be! And what about kids? A son maybe to grow up and find out from other kids that his old man was a killer. Killer Carr's boy . . . Well, I say it's no good. There isnt going to be any wedding next month. Maybe, if I ever find Nate Kranson—"

Nora cut in abruptly and now there was in her voice a stiffness and restraint worse than anger: "If you don't mind, Denny, I'd rather not talk about it."

She reached for the car door and he started to reach for her but caught himself in time. He sat still, hearing her say, "I'm too tired to argue, Denny. Good night—and thanks for the lovely evening."

He watched her get out and go up the steps. He saw the door close on her and he could bear the ache inside him now because this was best. This was, after all, what he had to do . . .

Denny Carr said nothing of this to his mother but it was a strain, and he was glad when, two days later, a call came from her sister who was sick and wanted to know if his mother would come and stay with her a few days in Hartford.

He came home shortly before six that night and got rid of his gun and cleaned up and then took his mother to the bus station. He ate alone in a place where no one was likely to know him and had a couple of beers and came home just after nine.

It was a warm evening and the door of the house—an old brick house that had been converted into apartments—stood open. Denny went up the steps, and through the vestibule and as he stepped through the open inner doorway the man moved out from behind the stairs that lay

against the left wall twenty feet ahead.

He was a burly, thick-necked man and his name was Eddie Rocco and there was a snub-nosed gun in his big hand. And in that first instant, Denny Carr saw that even had he been carrying his own gun he would have no chance to use it. He took a slow step, seeing now that Nate Kranson had followed Rocco from behind the stairs, then waited for them, tensed, alert, resentful and fully aware that he was in deadly danger.

Nate Kranson was a thin, swart man with a tight, ugly mouth and mean little eyes. He spoke once to Rocco and came close, holding the gun steady while the big man slapped Denny's pockets and stepped back.

"No gun, hunh?" Kranson said. "And your old lady's out, ain't she? So let's go upstairs and get it. I'm gonna let you have it with the same gun you used on Lee, copper."

Denny Carr looked at Rocco, keeping an eye on Kranson's gun. He said, "You were with him the other night, Rocco," and as he spoke he lunged sideways and grabbed for Kranson's hand.

He got the hand as the gun went off. He kept moving, holding the gun hand, and reached for Kranson with his left. Rocco fired from four feet away and Denny's arm was up and the bullet slammed high up under the arm and he felt the numbing shock in his chest.

It did not stop him. He had the front of Kranson's coat in his left hand now and he yanked and pivoted, spinning the other in front of him as he twisted at the gun. Rocco's gun hammered again. And again Denny felt the impact of the slug, not in his own body this time but in the frame of Nate Kranson.

Rocco was not a very good shot, or perhaps he was rattled, or maybe it was like the night when Denny had aimed at an arm only to have his man duck aside at the wrong instant. And Rocco saw what he had done, for Kranson, with Rocco's bullet in him, cried out and stiffened before he started to sag to the floor.

Denny held him and twisted the gun free. Rocco saw this, and now Rocco had had enough. He spun and leaped through the doorway and through the vestibule and down the steps.

Denny let go of Nate Kranson and stepped around him. He ran to the outer doorway and stopped there. Rocco was in the street now, running, firing once over his shoulder in a shot that went wide.

Denny snapped up Kranson's gun and, not thinking, aimed low and fired. Rocco took one more running step and fell on his face as though one leg had been cut from under him, his

gun spinning across the pavement.

Two men, passing on the opposite side of the street, stopped to watch and Denny called to them. He told them to get the gun and watch Rocco. He went back into the hall and told the assembled wide-eyed tenants to phone the police and to clear out of the hall.

He thought about his own gun then, and wondered if, in spite of the spreading numbness in his chest, he could walk upstairs and get it. Captain Hague would bawl him out for not carrying it but right now he could not seem to care much. He sat down on the steps and watched Kranson and fought against a giddiness that was getting worse with every passing second.

THEY GAVE Denny Carr some pills after they'd finished cleaning the wound and he slept a long time. It was midafternoon when he finally awoke and when he glanced about he saw Tom Linehan sitting there grinning at him.

"How do you feel?"

"Feel fine," Denny said. "What about Rocco and Kranson?"

"Rocco's going to be limping for a long time. That shot of yours smashed his knee. And Kranson'll be okay. Right now he's talking plenty. The gun you took away from him is the one that killed McCarthy, the cop, in that liquor-store break."

Denny stared. "What?" he said, a little slow at figuring.

Linehan nodded. "It was the gun Lee Kranson pulled on you that night. Nate says so. He has to say so and I think he's telling the truth. It's like this: After you shot Lee you chased Rocco and Nate, but it was Rocco you really chased because Nate hid just outside the door and you didn't see him.

"When you went after Rocco he ducked back into the room. Lee was alive and didn't think that he was going to die and he had to get rid of this gun that killed McCarthy. So Nate took it and legged it down the alley the other way. When you got back there wasn't any gun."

McQuillen came in shortly after Linehan left. He had a paper in his hand and passed it to Denny. In it was a story that told of the shooting and spoke not of Killer Carr but of Detective Dennis Carr.

"You're lucky," McQuillen said.

Denny agreed. He said the doctor told him if the bullet had been lower and to the left a little it would have been curtains.

"That isn't what I meant," McQuillen said. "I mean having a girl like Nora Marin. She came in to see me a couple of days ago. She bawled me out and she made a point I hadn't

thought about before. She said I was making a mistake writing about *'Killer'* Carr because she said in a way you represented every other guy who would come back."

McQuillen paused. He seemed a bit embarrassed. "She said all women will worry some about their men who come back, and I was making it worse by playing up the killing angle. Well, she's right, I guess. I hadn't thought about it before."

McQuillen had more to say along the same line and when he left, Denny Carr lay there, humble but impatient, and watched the door until Nora came. Her cheeks were flushed with hurrying and her eyes were anxious.

"They said you were all right," she said. "They told me you'd sleep most of the day so—I went to work."

It was so wonderful to see her, to have her with him, that for a long moment he just looked at her and was content.

"Come here," he said finally. "Give me a kiss."

She tipped her head and eyed him with amused severity. "I'm not sure I want to. I don't mind marrying a detective—if he's a good one—but I'm not sure I want to marry an idiot. You didn't have your gun last night."

He grinned. He did not bother to tell her that it would have done little good under the circumstances. He said, happily, "I shot him in the knee. Rocco, I mean."

She came to the bed, frowning, putting her cool hand on his head.

He knew she didn't understand, so he said: "I didn't have to. When I came back I knew Korea hadn't made a killer out of me. But after the publicity and the way people looked at me and called me Killer, I began to wonder if maybe I'd changed and didn't know it. But—well, if it had been an enemy soldier in Korea—I'd have shot him in the body. But *I aimed at Rocco's leg, just automatically, without thinking,* and that proves—"

Nora was on the bed, bending over him, her eyes moist and tender as she kissed him. "You goon," she whispered. "You sweet stubborn goon. Don't you think I knew? But you just wouldn't let me tell you."

Nora had her cheek against his now and he clung to her, his heart full and his eyes scratchy. He thought about the things she had said to McQuillen, how she had defended him to his mother, and he knew then that if every woman was just half as patient and understanding with her man as Nora had been with him, those who came back would have no trouble.

the death stone

by . . . Cornell Woolrich

In the lexicon of the experts blackmail and murder are twin bedfellows. But each may weave, quite separately, a deadly pattern.

THE LATCHKEY jammed, and I had to stand there shaking as if I had St. Vitus dance before I could get it to work right. My wrists shook, my arms shook, my shoulders shook, trying to force it around. And above all else, my heart shook with the terror.

I was shaking so, it even made the empty milk-bottle standing outside the door sing out. I'd accidentally touched it with the tip of my shoe, I guess. The day maid had a note for the milkman curled up in the neck of it, in the shape of a little paper funnel.

I took the key out, drew a deep breath, and tried again. This time the door opened like pie. There hadn't been anything the matter with the key. I'd been holding it upside down, that was all. I sidled in, eased the door silently closed again behind me—and Mrs. James Shaw was home.

The hall clock chimed four times. They say you can only die once, but I died four times, once for each chime-strike. Not that I wasn't supposed to be out. I could have even rung the doorbell, and saved myself all that

The Saint himself—or Leslie Charteris, if you prefer—once pointed out that Cornell Woolrich has appeared before in our pages under a shorter but equally illustrious pen name. "But," Simon added, "we ain't telling." However, we rather suspect that guessing should not be difficult, for Cornell Woolrich and his nome de plume "competitor" have chalked up between them a record of crime story smash hits on the silver screen possibly unique in our time. And here is a Woolrich mystery yarn charged with suspense from its core to its perimeter.

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wrestling with the key. But I couldn't face anyone, not even Jimmy, just then. Even if he'd just said, "Have a good time at the night club with the Perrys?" —even if he'd just looked at me, I would have busted down and tried to crawl into his lapel. I needed to be alone. I needed time to pull myself together.

He'd left the light on for me in the hall. He was still up, working away in the library on his income-tax report. He had the door closed, but I could tell by the light shining out under the sill of it. He always waited until the last minute, like most taxpayers do, and then he had to sit up all night to beat the deadline on it. That was why he'd had to miss the party, and send me out with the Perrys alone.

It was just a coincidence, but I could thank my lucky stars he'd had to finish it tonight. That was just about the only thing in the whole mess there was to be thankful for. It meant at least there wouldn't be any trouble between Jimmy and me.

I tiptoed down the hall toward our bedroom, slipped in, and closed the door behind me. I gave it the lights and took a couple of deep body-sobs that had been bottled-up in me with the stopper on tight for the past three-quarters of an hour.

The mirror showed me a golden wreck staggering across the room toward it. All glittery on the outside: gold-sheath dress, diamonds everywhere there was room to hang them—around my neck, around my wrists, swinging from my ears. Not so glittery on the inside: plenty scared.

I sat down in front of the glass, held my head with both hands for a minute. I could have used a shot of cognac right then. But it would have meant to go out of the room for it, and I might have run head-on into Jimmy, taking a bracer himself between exemption lies. So I let it go, even though it would have taken the edge off my panic.

When I got my second wind, the first thing I did was open my gold evening pouch and take out—what I had in it. The fashion ran to big evening bags this season, and that was a lucky break for me.

I'd needed a lot of room tonight. The letters made a bulky packet. And the little gun I'd taken along, just to be on the safe side—that took up room, too. The ten thousand dollars in cash didn't take up any room, because I hadn't brought the money back with me. I'd swapped it for the letters.

That gives you the whole story. Well, maybe not quite, so in fairness to myself I'd better run over it just once. His name was Carpenter. The letters had been written to him five years ago, three years before I even knew

there was a Jimmy Shaw in the world. I should have been safe enough. But he'd made use of a trick to bring them up to date. It was a clever trick, to give his viciousness full due.

Here's what he'd done. At the time I'd originally written them, we'd both been staying at the same seaside resort hotel, only on different floors. I'd had them delivered to him personally by bell-boys I took care to tip well, not sent through the mail. In other words he'd received the envelopes sealed and addressed to him in my handwriting, but unstamped and undated by any post office cancellation.

He must have been a careful letter-opener, the kind that just makes a neat slit down the side of an envelope instead of tearing it ragged. He'd pasted over the slits with strips of scotch tape, put a brand new stamp on each one, added his present street and city address beneath his name, and then sent them back through the mail a second time—addressed to himself.

One at a time, over a period of weeks, being careful to match the mailing date with the original date inside at the top of the note paper. Get the idea?

Each one had come back to him with this year's date postmarked on the outside, to match the five-year-old date on the inside. I hadn't bothered inserting the year—just the day of the week and the month. He'd had an amazing run of luck with those cancellations, too. Not one of them had blurred or smudged. The month and year stood out clear as a diamond. Then when he'd gotten them back, he'd peeled off the scotch tape.

In other words, he'd turned a lot of foolishly moonstruck but harmless notes written to him by a young girl into a batch of dangerously incriminating letters written to him by a respectable and socially prominent young married woman with a wealthy husband.

And he'd done it by simply sticking stamps on them. What an investment! At an expenditure of a few cents a head, he'd gotten back one thousand dollars on each one. There had been ten that were usable; the others either had been signed with my full family name or had things in them that dated them as from that summer.

You'd think a corny set-up like that, which they don't even use in the movies anymore, wouldn't go over. I should have refused to pay off, and gone straight to Jimmy about it. But it's so easy to be brave until you're face to face with something like that. He'd had me over a barrel. His technique had been beautifully simple and direct. He'd first called me three or four days ago. He'd said, "Remember me?

Well, I need ten thousand dollars."

I'd hung up.

He'd called right back again before I could even move away from the phone. "You didn't let me finish what I was saying. I have some letters that you wrote to me. I thought maybe that you'd prefer to have them back than to have them lying around loose."

I'd hung up again.

He'd called back late that same night, after midnight. Luckily, I answered, and not Jimmy. "I'm giving you one more chance," he warned. "One of them's in the mail already, enclosed in an envelope addressed to your husband. He'll get one every morning, until they're all used up. And the price for the rest'll go up a thousand, each time I send one out.

"I'm sending the first one to your house and tipping you off ahead of time, so you'll still have a chance to sidetrack it before he sees it. After that, they'll go to his club, where you can't get your hands on them. Think it over. Call me tomorrow at eleven, and let me know what you've decided." And he gave me his number.

I sneaked the letter off the mail tray before Jimmy saw it. I read it over. It should have been written on asbestos. *"All night I lie awake and dream of you. . . . I'd follow you to the ends of the earth . . ."* No one would realize that I had hoped he would marry me.

I saw what he'd done. How could I prove I'd written them five years before? My handwriting hadn't changed. Note paper doesn't show any particular age, especially the deckled gray kind I'd used then and was still using now, with just a crest instead of a monogram. The tables turned. I could hardly wait for eleven to come. I hung around the phone all morning.

When he answered, all I said, breathlessly, was: "That'll be all right. Just tell me where and when."

Tonight had been when, and the apartment I'd just come from had been where. And ten thousand dollars out of my own private checking account had been how much.

At least I'd gotten them all back and it was over. Or is blackmail ever over with? Is it a game that you can ever beat? There was a fireplace in our bedroom, and I burned the letters in there, one by one—contents and envelopes and spiked cancellations. When the last of them was gone in smoke, I felt a lot better. For about three and a half minutes.

I started to strip off the sparkle, and I opened the little embossed leather case I kept it all in. It was divided into compartments for each variety. The bracelets went into one, the rings

into another, and so on. I came to the one for the earrings last. I took the right one off first and pitched it in. Then I reached for the left, and my fingers came together on just the bare lobe of my ear. No left earring.

For a minute I sat there without moving, and my face got white and my heart got chilly. Then I jumped up, and shook out my dress, and looked all around on the floor. I was just fighting off panic. I knew where I must have dropped it, all right, but I didn't want to let on to myself that I knew.

I was sure it hadn't been at the club with the Perrys, and in the first taxi, going over to the Other Place. I'd given a sort of shudder just before he opened the door for me, and happened to touch both earrings with my hands. And I knew it hadn't been in the second taxi, from there home, either.

There was only one time I'd moved violently or agitatedly all evening long, and that was over there, when he'd tried to chuck me under the chin after he'd counted over the money, and I'd reared my head back. It must have been right then that it had come off. The catch had been defective anyway; I'd had no business wearing it.

I had to have it back. Jimmy was taking them down with him tomorrow, to have them repaired. I could tell him I'd lost one of them, but that would uncover my movements. And there was an even more important reason why I had to get it back. If I left it with *him,* the whole thing would start over again as soon as he'd run through the ten thousand I'd just given him. He'd simply use it to bleed me some more. It was an easily recognizable piece of jewelry, made specially for me.

I went over to the door and listened first, to make sure Jimmy was still safely in the library. I couldn't hear a sound, so it looked as if he was. Then I picked up the extension phone we had in the bedroom and dialed the number of Carpenter's place that he'd given me the day before, along with his final ultimatum.

Suppose he denied having found the earring? Suppose he was far-seeing enough to figure on its coming in handy as a future pledge? I couldn't add anything to the ten thousand, not until next month. My account was down to bedrock. He had to give it back to me!

The phone kept ringing, and he didn't answer. I was sure he hadn't left his apartment.

I'd just come from there myself. He might light out the first thing in the morning, but there was no need for him to leave in the middle of the night. If I was going to bring the police into it, I would have done so before the transaction was concluded, not

after. Even if he was asleep, the phone surely ought to wake him up, the way it was buzzing away at his end.

I hung up, tried it over. No more luck than the first time. I was sure it was the right number, because I'd used it to notify him of my capitulation. I shook the instrument, jolted it, thumped it against the table. I had to give up finally. I couldn't just sit there listening to it all night. I was good and scared now.

I had to have that earring, even if it meant—going all the way back to Carpenter's apartment in person, at this hour. And there was no place under the sun or the moon I wouldn't have rather returned to—a cage of wild lions, a pit of rattlesnakes, a leprosarium.

I took the gun with me once more. I didn't think Carpenter could really be cowed by such a midget weapon in the hands of a woman, but it made me feel a little less defenseless. I unlocked the door and sidled down the hall. If I could only get out without bumping into Jimmy, then when I came back the second time, I could simply tell him it was the first time. I could make him think I'd stayed late with the Perrys at the club or something.

The light was gone from under the library door! He must have finished his work and gone out for a walk to clear his head. Who could blame him, after battling with those tax-blanks all night? It was all to the good, provided I didn't run into him outside just as I was leaving. The milk-bottle with its paper funnel was still on lonesome duty.

I made it. I was dying to ask the night elevator operator, when he brought me down, "Did Mr. Shaw go out just a little while ago?" But I forced myself not to. It sounded too underhanded.

I gave the cab driver the address, and slumped back on the seat with a sigh of relief.

II

When I got out in front of the sinister-looking place I told the driver to wait for me. I looked up the front of it, and I saw just the one lighted window—*his*. He was up there, and he was still awake. Maybe he'd stepped out for just a minute at the time I'd rung.

I said to the driver, "Have you got a watch on you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, I want you to do something for me. Time me. If I have not come out in ten minutes, step over and ring the bell. The one that says 'Carpenter' on it." I smiled insincerely. "Just to remind me. I don't want to stay too long, and I have a bad habit of losing track of the time whenever I go any place."

He grinned understandingly. "Sure, ma'am. Ten minutes."

I went in. The entrance door was supposed to work on a spring lock, but somebody had forgotten to close it, so I passed right through without waiting and started the long climb that I'd already made once before.

The place was a walk-up. I wanted to give him as little advance notice of what had brought me back as possible. My best chance of recovering the earring without any further strings being attached to it was to catch him off guard, before his crooked mind had a chance to go to work on this new situation.

I knocked muffledly, when I finally got up to the top. It was the only apartment on that floor: an extra story must have been added when the building had been converted to multiple tenancy.

He didn't move, didn't make a sound. I'd expected that. Live dangerously, and a knock on the door can make you freeze. I could visualize him, standing at bay somewhere in there, holding his breath.

I knocked again, inclined my head to the seam, and said in a guarded voce: "Let me in. It's me again."

I couldn't bring myself to use his name. As far as I was concerned he didn't deserve one, only a number. I had sense enough not to use my own.

He still didn't stir. I shook the knob in growing impatience, and the door fell inertly back before me.

I ventured in after it, expecting to find him sighting a gun at me. That was the usual trick they pulled, wasn't it? He wasn't in the main room. He must be in the little darkened bed-alcove, I told myself—must have lain down in there and forgotten to put the light out in here.

I didn't go into the alcove. There was just a slim chance—a very slim one—that he hadn't found the earring himself yet, that it was still lying around out here unnoticed, and that I might be able to pick it up on my own hook and slip out again without having to accost him. I doubted it very much. It would have been too good to be true. But I started to look just the same.

First I looked all over the sofa where I'd sat riffling through the letters. Then I got down on all fours, gold dress and all, and started to explore the floor at its base—around and under and alongside it. It was a decrepit, top-heavy piece of furniture and it threw a big shadow behind it from the ceiling light.

My groping hand crept around one corner of it, and nestled into somebody else's, in a macabre gesture of a handclasp. I whipped it back with a gasp of abysmal terror and sprang away, a pulsing constriction in my throat.

And at the same time I heard a sharp intake of breath.

I stepped around and looked down, and he was lying there. The position of the bulky sofa had hid him from me until now. Did I say just now he deserved a number? He'd gotten one. And it was up.

One arm was flung out along the floor—the one that I'd just touched. He was lying on his back, and his jacket had fallen open. You could see where he'd been shot; it showed on the white of his shirt. The bullet must have gone into his heart, for the hole in the fabric and the bloodied encrustation that surrounded it were around that region. The gun he hadn't had time to use had fallen uselessly over to one side.

My first impulse, of course, was to turn and get out as fast as possible. But I fought it down. "Find the earring first," I reasoned with myself. "You've got to get it back! You've got to." It was more vital to recover it than ever. It wasn't just a case of keeping my presence here from Jimmy's knowledge now. It was a case of keeping it from the police! What was blackmail compared to being dragged into a murder case—and all the avalanches of notoriety that would ensue?

I found myself doing something I wouldn't have believed I had had the nerve to do: bending down over him and going through all his pockets. He did not have it on him. He didn't have the ten thousand cash any more either, but I didn't care about that. It wasn't identifiable.

I crouched there, suddenly motionless. My hand had just then accidentally, as might have been expected, fleetingly contacted his flesh in the course of my search. The brief touch was repellent, yes. But that wasn't what made me freeze rigid and stare unseeingly along the floor before me. It was this: the touch of his clammy skin was already cool, far cooler than my own.

My sketchy knowledge of such matters was sufficient to tell me that meant he'd been dead some little time—at least forty-five minutes. The point was, he'd certainly been dead by the time I'd come into the room just now.

And belatedly, like a long-delayed and not at all funny mental double take, I was just remembering that I'd heard a sharp intake of breath at the moment I'd jolted back and given my own strangled little gasp of discovery.

If he was dead, he hadn't made the sound. And I hadn't either.

Not a muscle moved. Just my optic nerves. My eyes traveled over the floor to the arched, doorless entrance to the dark sleeping-alcove, and the musty green curtain, bunched together, that hung down on one side of it. The curtain hung perfectly motion-

less, just as everything else in the place was perfectly motionless—including myself and the dead man on the floor.

But it hung just short of the floor—oh, not more than a couple of inches. And I could see the hub of a single shoe standing there, in the gap. Perfectly motionless, deceptively motionless. If I'd been standing full height I wouldn't have been able to see it. The bottom of the drape would have overhung it. It was only because I was down low on the floor as I was, that my line of vision was able to reach it.

It could have been a discarded shoe of Carpenter's, dropped to the floor in there and happening to land upright. Even though it was pointing straight toward me, as if to match an unseen pair of eyes somewhere high over it, looking out through an unsuspected rent in the drape. It could have been, but then it wouldn't have moved.

As if the direction of my eyes had power to lend it motion, it shifted stealthily back and was gone.

There was only one coherent thought in the fireworks display of panic going off inside my head: "Don't scream. Don't move. Someone in there has been watching you ever since you came in. He may let you go, if you don't let on you've spotted him. Work yourself over toward the door, and then break out fast."

I straightened up, the earring forgotten. I just wanted out. My feet took a surreptitious step under the cover of the gold dress. Then another, and after about five seconds, a third—like in that kid's game where they're not supposed to catch you moving. I was half way over to it now. But even if the maneuvering of my feet couldn't be detected, the position of my body in the room kept changing. That was enough to give me away.

About one more step now. I was just starting to raise my hand unnoticeably in front of me, to tear at the knob and fling myself out, when I heard a click behind me. The sort of a click that a triphammer makes when it goes back. My eyes went around in spite of myself. The drape was out of the way and a man had taken its place now. He was holding a gun at about belt-buckle level.

Even if I hadn't met him across a gun—and across a man he'd already killed—the mere sight of him would have thrown a jolt into me. His expression was the epitome of viciousness. You didn't have to wonder if he'd shoot. You only had to wonder when he would. His face was a mirror: it showed me my own imminent death about to take place. He hadn't had to step out and show himself. He could have allowed me get away without seeing who he was. The mere fact

that he had stepped out, showed that he wasn't going to let me out of that room alive.

You could hear his breath rasp against his imperfectly shaved upper lip, like something frictioning sandpaper. That was all you could hear in the place, that little sound. You couldn't hear my breath at all. My heart had blown a fuse.

Suddenly he made a move and I thought for a minute the bullet had found me. But he'd only hitched his head at me, ordering me to come closer.

I couldn't. My feet wouldn't have done it even if I'd wanted them to. "No, don't," I pleaded, my eyes on the gun.

"You're not getting out of here to pin this on me," he said, warningly. His lips parted and white showed through. But it wasn't a grin, it was just a baring of teeth. "I want the dough he was coming into tonight, see? I got a line on that—never mind how. Now come on, where is it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't—" I couldn't go ahead. I pointed to the still form lying between us on the floor.

Did you ever hear a hungry hyena howl against the moon? That was the inflection of his voice. "Come a-a-a-ahn, what'd you do with it?" Then his jaws snapped shut, still like a hyena's on a gruesome morsel of food. "All right, I don't have to ask for it. I can just reach for it!"

But he didn't mean with his fingers. He meant with a bullet. "You've seen me up here now. That's your tough luck." And he repeated again what he'd told me in the beginning: "You're not pinning this on me."

The gun twitched warningly, getting ready to recoil against the flat hollow of his indrawn stomach. I was as sure then as I wold ever be that it was my last minute.

Then instead of thundering out in the stillness, it went *gra-a-a-ack!* Like those little flat paddles on sticks that kids swing around to make noise with. And instead of coming from in front of him, it came from behind him, up on the wall of the bed-alcove somewhere. My knees dipped to let me down, and then stiffened and went on holding me up some more.

It startled the two of us alike. But I was able to recover quicker, because I knew instantly what it was, and he didn't. It threw him for a complete loss. It was one of those sounds that are so indefinite as to cause, and yet it was so close by, so harshly menacing. It was simply that taxi driver downstairs reminding me that my ten minutes were up.

He swung first to one side, then to the other, then all the way around, half-crouching, and the gun went off me completely.

I pulled at the doorknob, whisked out, and went down the stairs like a gold streak.

He came out after me just as I reached the first turn. There was a window there and it was open a little both at the top and bottom, in order to ventilate the stairs and halls during the night. He shot down the stairs at me, on a descending line of fire, just as I flashed around the turn and got out of it.

It didn't hit me, but it should have hit the window and shattered it or it should have hit the plaster of the wall and ploughed into it. It didn't hit anywhere.

Later, long afterwards, it came back to me that, through some freak of downward slanting, it must have gone out through the inches-wide lower ventilator opening without hitting anything. I didn't think of that then, though. I was too frantically intent on getting down the rest of those stairs and out to the street.

He didn't fire after me a second time. He couldn't aim at me from where he was any more. The underside of the stairs over me protected me now. His only chance of hitting me would have been to run down after me and overtake me on the same section of stairs.

He still could have done that if he'd tried. Any man is quicker than a woman, particularly a woman in mamba-clogs. But he was afraid of whoever it was that he imagined to be coming up from below, and he was afraid of rousing the house.

I heard his feet go scuffling up the other way, higher still, toward the roof.

The entry way was empty when I got down to it. The hackman must have gone right back to his machine after dutifully giving me the summons I'd asked for. He'd even missed hearing the shot. I could tell that by the cheerful matter-of-factness of his opening remark when I streaked out and burrowed into the back of his machine.

"Well, I sure brought you down fast, didn't I, lady?" he asked.

"T-take me back uptown," I said.

"Yes, ma'am."

The guardian milk-bottle was still standing by our door when I got out my latchkey for the second time that night. It seemed by now as if it had been standing there for years on end.

I let myself in and crept down the hall toward the bedroom. I opened the door and stopped short with my hand on the light-switch. Jimmy had come back, and was in there ahead of me, asleep already. I could hear the soft purr of his snoring in the darkness. He evidently hadn't been surprised by my continued absence. He must have thought I was still at the night club with the Perrys. His breathing was so

rhythmic, so regular, it almost sounded studied.

I crawled into my own bed in the dark and just lay there. I hadn't got the earring back. That was almost a minor matter by now. I kept seeing that face before me, viciously contorted, mirroring death to come. As sure as anything he was going to track me down, find me, and kill me. My life was forfeit to a murderer's self-preservation.

I was the only one who knew he had been up there. I was the only one who knew who had killed Carpenter. He had to get rid of me; his own safety demanded that.

Somewhere, sometime, when I least expected it, death was going to strike out at me. I was on borrowed time.

He would surely get me, unless—I got him first.

III

The lieutenant's name was Weill, I think. I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure of anything, only that I was striking first, protecting my own life in the only way I knew how.

"I am asking that this interview be treated in strictest confidence."

He looked at me patronizingly. I suppose he thought I was going to accuse someone of poisoning someone else's pet Pekingese.

"You can rely on us," he said, dryly.

"I am here to offer you a proposition," I went on quickly. "I am in a position to give you information which I think you will find not only timely but exceedingly helpful. In return you must promise me not to use my name in any shape, form or manner. It means the destruction of my happiness if you do, and I won't risk it. Who I am, who told you this, must not appear on any of your documents or reports or files."

He was still very condescending. "That's a tall order. Are you sure it's something we'd be interested in?"

"You're a lieutenant of the Homicide Squad? I'm *very* sure, lieutenant."

He gave me a more alert look. "Very well, I accept your terms."

"*You* do, yes. But how do I know it won't pass beyond your control? It's a matter that you will have to take others into your confidence about?"

"Nothing passes beyond my control in this division, if I don't care to have it do so," he assured me. "If, as you say, others have to be taken into my confidence, I can either pledge them, as you are pledging me, or keep you altogether anonymous, as 'Mrs. X.' or 'an unknown woman.' Does that satisfy you? I give you my word as a police officer."

I wasn't altogether sure of that, I didn't know enough about them. "I also want your word of honor as a man," I said.

He eyed me with increased respect. "That," he admitted, "is a whole lot more dependable. I give you both." And he took my hand and wrung it once.

I didn't hold back anything, didn't try to cover myself in any way. I told him about the letters, about Carpenter's contacting me, about my first visit there and the payment of the ten thousand cash. "I also took a gun, to make sure the situation wouldn't pass beyond my control," I told him. "Here it is. You can examine it if you want to make sure it wasn't I who did it." I passed it to him.

He weighed it in his hand, smiled a little. "I don't think it will be necessary to do that. The slug of a forty-five was taken out of Carpenter's body. This would be the tiny tot grandson of a forty-five." He fiddled with it, looked up. "Incidentally, did you know it wasn't loaded?"

He could tell by the look on my face I hadn't until then.

He fiddled some more with it. "In any case, it would have been quite a feat to fire it. Where did you get it?"

"Paris, France, before the war."

"Well, you were badly gypped. Most of the mechanism is missing. It's practically a dummy. All you bought is a lot of artistic pearl nacre and gilt metal in the outward shape of a gun."

I went into the second part of my story, the really pertinent part. If I hadn't known it was that already, the change in his attitude would have told me. He forgot his role of putting a feather-brained society woman at ease, and became a police-lieutenant with just an important witness before him.

"You'd know this man if you saw him again?" he asked sharply.

"All night I saw his face before me."

"You say he held a gun trained on you, before this interruption saved your life. Did you get a good look at it?"

"Quite good," I replied, shuddering.

"Have you a good eye for proportions, for taking in measurements at a glance?" he asked.

"Fairly."

He opened a desk-drawer, and took out a revolver. "Don't be nervous," he said. "This weapon is empty. Of course, you were frightened, so maybe it's not a fair test. But—this is a forty-five here. I am going to hold it just about as you say he held it. Now. Is it the same size as the one he held?"

"No," I replied, puzzled. "His seemed heavier, larger."

"But this is a forty-five calibre revolver," he emphasized.

"Look at it again. Now what do you say?"

I shook my head. "No. I may be mistaken, but somehow the one he held seemed to be a larger, heavier gun."

He replaced it, looked around in the drawer, finally took out another. "How about this one, then? This is far bigger than a forty-five. This is as big as they come."

I nodded my head affirmatively without a moment's hesitation. "Yes. That's the same size as the one he held."

He put it back in the drawer. "You're a reliable witness. The first gun was a thirty-eight. The *second* was the forty-five." He got up. "I am going to ask you to try and pick him out for us."

They were all so villainous looking. And yet none of them could approach him in viciousness. Maybe that was because I'd seen him in the flesh, in full dimension, and not just flat on paper, in black and white. There were two photos of each one, in profile and full-face. I ignored the profiles, and concentrated on the full-faces. That was the way he'd been turned toward me during those few awful moments up there.

I didn't really think I was going to find him. There were so many of them. Looking through this gallery of rogues, you wondered if there could be any honest, law-abiding people left in the world. I even turned to Weill, after the first half hour or so, and asked: "Do you really think you've got him in here?"

"We won't know that for sure until after you're through."

Once I nearly thought I saw him, but when I stopped short and looked more closely at that particular subject, recognition faded. It was just a superficial resemblance.

"Rest your eyes for a minute whenever you feel like it," Weill said solicitously.

They felt infected by looking at so much depravity. I opened them again and went ahead.

Suddenly I got up from the chair. I put my forefinger on the photograph, but not for his benefit yet, simply for my own, to hang onto it. I closed my eyes and held them that way for a moment. Then when I had his face good and clear, burning clear, I opened them. I let them travel down the line of my arm, all the way down to the end of my finger, and the face of the police photograph blended into the one glowing in my mind, without any changes of outline.

Then I turned to Weill. "This is the face of the man I saw up there," I said.

He said again what he'd said before, up in his office. "You're a good, dependable witness. I liked the way you did that just then." He bent forward above my shoulder and read from the

data accompanying the photos. "That's 'Sonny-Boy' Nelson. He's already wanted for murder, three times over. We've wanted him for a long time past—"

Back in his office, he finally noticed the change that had come over me since that last remark of his. "What is it, Mrs. Shaw? You seem troubled."

I gestured shakily, "Well, after all, lieutenant, why did I come here? To assure my own safety, to protect my life. This man saw me up there, just as I saw him. He knows I'm the only one who knows he was up there. He's going to try to kill me. He's surely going to try, so that I won't be able to tell that to anyone.

"Now if he's already been wanted for three murders, and you haven't gotten him so far, my identification makes no difference. You'll want him for four murders now, but that does not mean you'll get him any quicker than before. And meanwhile, what's to become of me? I'll be living in danger from one minute to the next."

"I'll detail someone to—"

I quickly warded that off with a gesture.

"No, you can't. How could such a thing escape Jim—my husband's—notice? He's bound to ask questions, wonder what it's all about. The whole thing would be certain to come out in the end. And that's the very thing I tried to avoid by coming here to you unmasked, entirely on my own accord."

He stared at me incredulously. "You mean, given a choice between risking your life in a very real sense, and having your husband learn of your *innocent* involvement in this whole affair, you'd rather take chances on your life?"

"Much rather," I told him very decisively.

I had been afraid *not* to pay the ten thousand. Now, because I had paid it, I was afraid to have it come out that I had. I was afraid he would think there must have been something to cover up after all, if I had been so anxious and willing to pay it.

"You're an unusual person," Weill let me know.

"No, I'm not. Happiness is a soap-bubble. Once it's been pricked, just try and get it back together again! This Sonny-Boy Nelson's bullets can miss me. But my bubble can never be repaired again, once it's burst. Even if it means just a stray thought passing through my husband's mind five years from now —'Where there's smoke there's fire!' I won't take that chance. I won't risk it. Nothing else in life matters to me." I got up and went toward the door.

Then I saw that he had more to say, so I stopped and looked back.

"Well, if you're willing to

take the risk that you are, spread out thin, over days and weeks, how about taking an even greater risk, but all at one time? Getting it over with then and there?"

I answered that by coming away from the door, returning to his desk, and reseating myself acquiescently.

"You said, a little while ago, that your coming here had done no good; that we'd only want him for one additional murder now but still without knowing where to find him. But you're mistaken. If you're willing to cooperate, run the risk that I just spoke of, we *will* know where to find him. Which is more than we ever knew before."

I saw what he meant. I shook a little, but I lit a cigarette.

"Tell me," he said, "are there any out-of-the-way places you're in the habit of going to by yourself, entirely unaccompanied by your husband or friends or anyone else? I mean, without departing from your normal routine or habits of life?"

I thought for a moment. "Yes," I said, "there are."

IV

Jimmy didn't mind my doing private charity work, going around to a few handpicked cases I happened to know of and doing what I could for them. But he didn't like the parts of town it took me into at times. Above all, he didn't like the idea of my going alone into some of those places. He'd warned me again and again to take someone with me.

I made the rounds only about once a month, anyway. I wasn't a professional welfare worker. I never had more than half a dozen at a time on my list, and they were all people that for one reason or another fell outside the scope of the regular relief agencies. Borderline cases that would have been left in the lurch if it hadn't been for me.

Like this old Mrs. Scalento, living alone and too proud to apply to the city for help. She wouldn't have been eligible anyway; she could make enough to support herself when she was well. But right now she was laid up with arthritis or something, and needed tiding over. That was where I came in.

I got out of the cab outside the tunnel-like black entrance of the rookery she lived in. They never had any lights on the stairs there, but I'd brought a little pocket-flash along in my bag for just that purpose. This was the very sort of place Jimmy had specifically warned me not to venture into alone, particularly at night. But I'd got newer instructions since—from somebody else who was just as concerned for my safety.

I sent the taxi off. I usually stayed up there a considerable

time with her, and it was cheaper to get another one when I came out again. The money that the meter would have swallowed could keep her for a week in food and medicine.

I groped my way down the long Stygian hallway that led back to where I knew the stairs must be—from my memory of past visits alone. When I'd found the bottom one with my foot—the dim light coming in from the street behind me failed to penetrate any deeper—I stopped for a moment. I reached into my bag for the pocket-flash, to light me the rest of the way up.

Did you ever have a feeling of someone being near you, without seeing anything, without hearing a sound? Animals have that faculty of detection, I know. But that's through their sense of scent. Scent wasn't involved in this. It was just some sort of a pulsing that told of another presence close to me in the darkness. To one side of the battered staircase, or perhaps around behind it.

I got the flash out and it shot a little white spill of light up the stairs in front of me before I'd even realized I'd nudged the control-lever on. It must have been obvious which direction I was going to turn it in next, by the way it shook and slipped around in my hand.

The voice was so quiet—so reassuringly quiet. It seemed to come from right beside me, at my very elbow almost. "Don't turn the light this way, Mrs. Shaw."

Mrs. Shaw! So then I knew what it was.

"Weill's man," came reassuringly, and I could have wept with relief. "Don't be frightened, Mrs. Shaw. We're covering every one of these places you've showed up at tonight. Just act as you would at any other time."

I went on up the stairs, after I'd gotten my breath back and my heartbeat had slowed a little, thinking half-resentfully: "I'm glad he was there, of course. But the Other One himself couldn't have frightened me any worse!"

That was what *I* thought.

I knocked when I got up to her door, and then let myself in without further ado. I had to, because the old lady didn't have the use of her legs.

She was sitting there propped up in bed, the way I usually found her. She didn't seem glad to see me. Her face always lit up as though I were a visiting angel when I came in, and she'd start to bless me in Italian. Tonight she just stared at me with an intentness that almost seemed to have hostility in it. She didn't utter a word of greeting, just held my gaze steadily.

She had just this one large barren room, and then a black hole of a kitchen, without any

window at all, leading off from it. I closed the door after me.

"Well, how are we tonight?" I greeted her.

She gave an impatient swerve of her head away from me, almost as though she resented my coming in on her, as though I were unwelcome. I pretended not to notice the unmistakable surliness—not to mention ingratitude—of the reception I was getting.

The air of the room was stagnant, murky. None of these people were great believers in ventilation. "Don't you think it would be a good idea to let a little fresh air in here?" I suggested. I crossed to the window and raised it slightly from the bottom. She glared at me.

"How's your plant getting along?" I asked, crouching slightly to stare out at it. I'd sent her over a potted geranium, to cheer her up. She kept it out there on the window-ledge.

A look of almost ferocious vindictiveness passed over her face, as I straightened up and turned away. "You don't have worry about it; it's alright," she let me know in husky defiance.

It was the first remark she'd uttered since I came in. She was kneading her fingers palsiedly. Or maybe she was trying to convey something with them, I don't know.

I drew out my usual bedside chair and sat down by her. She wouldn't turn to look at me. She just kept staring stubbornly straight ahead, as though I were not there at all.

I tried to win her over. "Have you been using that electric heater? Does it take any of the stiffness out, make you feel any better?"

She said gruffly, "Lots better. Lots better."

She had folded her arms across her chest now in a sort of stubborn sulkiness, and she kept jabbing one hand surreptitiously out from underneath the opposite arm. Not toward me, more—toward the door.

I said finally, in a low confidential voice, "What are you trying to tell me?"

Her face flashed around toward me. She bared her almost toothless mouth in a grimace that held frightened supplication in it. "I'm not try to tell you anything. What did you hear me say? Do I tell you anything?"

"I'll do my own telling," the new voice said.

Someone had come out of the kitchen and was standing right behind my chair. He was standing so close to it that even when I swerved my head and tried to look behind me out of the corner of my eye, all I could make out was a blur of gray suiting, flat up against the chair-back.

I leapt to my feet, my chest going up and down like a bellows. A hand slipped around from behind me and riveted itself

to my wrist, steely and implacable. The chair slashed over, discarded.

"Remember me?" was all he said.

The old lady, as if released from a spell, began to jabber now that it was too late: *"Signora!* This man come here early tonight. He said he know you visit me every time around first of the month. He said he's going to wait for you. I cannot make him go away. I cannot get up from bed and call policeman. He say if I tell you he's in there he shoot me. All the time he point gun at me. I cannot talk—"

He chopped the gun-butt around horizontally at her forehead, without letting go of me, and she flopped back stunned on the pillow. I never saw anything more brutal in my life.

He gave the gun a little dexterous flip then, that brought his grip back to the heft. "Now suppose we take up where we left off the other night, you and me."

I saw he was going to let me have the bullet then and there. He swung me around toward him by my arm, and brought the gun up, to contact-point against my side. He wasn't taking any chances this time.

He'd maneuvered me out away from the bed—I suppose so there'd be room enough for me to fall. But that had slightly changed our respective positions. Now he was between me and the door. His back was to the door, and I was facing it. But because of his body towering over me I couldn't see beyond him. I never even heard the door open. I only heard the terminal thud it made at the other end of its arc, when it brought up flat against the wall. And I heard the harsh order that followed quickly on the thud.

"Drop that gun, Nelson. You are covered three ways!"

There was an awful moment of suspended motion, when nothing seemed to happen. Then the gun loosened, skidded down my side and hit the floor.

A man's head and shoulders showed up, one at each side of him, and there was a third figure overlapping a little behind him. His two sleeves tightened up, as if drawn from behind, and so did the neck of his coat-collar. The front buttons pulled tight, drawing the collar nearly up under his chin.

He'd even forgotten to let go of my wrist. He was still holding it until after they clicked the handcuffs on him. Then I jerked my arm free.

That ended it. That was all there was to it. It was over.

They said to me, "You must have seen him the minute you got in, to tip us off so quickly—"

"No, I didn't," I said, taking a deep breath. "I didn't see him until just a minute ago, right before you broke in."

"Then how did you manage to—?"

"I knew he was here the minute I stepped through the door," I said. "I could tell by the frozen expression of Mrs. Scalento's face that she was under some kind of restraint or compulsion. And the air was close with stale cigarette-smoke. He'd smoked two or three cigarettes too many, back there, while he was waiting for me to show up. I knew she never used them herself.

"But it was too late to go back out through the door again. Once I'd shown myself he would have shot me down from where he was. So I stepped over to the window on the pretext of getting some air into the room, and gave that potted plant she kept on it a soundless little nudge off into space."

I shivered, just recalling it.

The detective in charge said, "We'll hold him up here for a couple of minutes. That will give Mrs. X. a chance to get away from the neighborhood first, before anyone spots her. You see that she gets home safely, Dillon."

"Will Mrs. Scalento be all right?" I asked.

"She'll be all right," he assured me. "We'll look after her."

"Poor Mrs. Scalento," I said, going down the stairs with the man delegated to accompany me, "I'll have to buy her another plant."

V

The formal identification was brief, and, as far as I was concerned, of about the same degree of comfort as the extraction of a live tooth without anesthesia. Why they felt they needed it I don't know, since, according to my bargain with Weill, my own identity was to remain unrevealed. It took place in Weill's office, with a heavy guard at the door, to keep eavesdroppers—even inter-departmental ones—at a distance.

"Bring him in," Weill said.

I didn't raise my eyes from the floor until the scuff of unwilling shoe-leather dragged against its will across the corridor had stopped short.

"Mrs. X. Is this the man you saw in the living-quarters of one John Carpenter—East—th Street at about four-thirty a.m. on the fifteenth day of April?"

My voice rang out like a bell. "Yes, that is the same man."

"Did he have a weapon in his hand?"

"He had a weapon in his hand."

"Stand up, please, and repeat what you have just said under oath."

I stood up. They thrust a Bible toward me and I placed my right hand on it as if we had been in a courtroom. I repeated after the man swearing me in: ". . . the whole truth, and nothing but the

truth." Then I said: "I solemnly swear that I saw this man, with a weapon in his hand, in the living-quarters of John Carpenter —East—th Street, at about four-thirty a.m., April the fifteenth."

Nelson's fatigue-cracked voice shattered the brief silence. "You can't pin this on me! I didn't do it, d'ya hear. *I didn't do it!*"

"No, and you didn't kill Little Patsy O'Connor either, did you? Or Schindel? Or Duke Bidderman, in a car right outside his own front door? Take him out!"

"She's framing me! She done it herself, and then she made a deal with you, to switch it to me!"

They dragged him out, still mouthing imprecations. The closing of the door toned them down, but you could still hear them dying away along the corridor outside.

Weill turned back to me and let his fingertips touch my gloved hand reassuringly for a moment, maybe because he saw that it was vibrating slightly, as was only natural after the scene of violence that had just taken place.

"That's all, Mrs. Shaw. That finishes your participation in the affair. You just go home now and forget about it."

I could carry out the first part of his injunction all right but I had my doubts about the second.

"You had a stenographic transcription made of my identification of him just now," I faltered uneasily.

"Yes, and I'm also having signed depositions made out by those two witnesses you saw in the room a moment ago—regarding what took place there. In other words I'm preparing affidavits under oath of *your* affidavit, so that it doesn't have to hang suspended in midair. But that needn't alarm you. I have the approval of the D. A.'s office on getting around it this way in your case."

"But in the courtroom, won't he—won't his lawyer, I mean—demand that you produce me for cross-examination?"

"Let him. The D. A.'s office is taking that into account, in preparing its procedure. I'm prepared to take the stand in your place, as your proxy, if necessary. And police-lieutenant or not, I don't think I'd make the kind of a witness whose testimony would be lightly disregarded."

He seemed to have taken care of every contingency; I felt a whole lot better.

He shook my hand. "I keep my bargains. You're out of it to stay. All knowledge of you ends with us."

He said to the detective standing outside the door, "Take this lady to the special departmental car you'll find waiting for her outside. Go along in it with her and keep everyone at a distance. Take her to the Ninth Street side-entrance of the Kay Department Store."

That was the biggest one in the city. I went in, walked through it on the bias without stopping to buy anything, and a moment later hailed a taxi at the main entrance, and had myself driven home.

The whole town had been talking about it for several weeks past, so I wasn't surprised when it finally penetrated even to Jimmy's insulated consciousness. I was only surprised that it had taken so long. But the news of the world, for Jimmy, were only the quotations that trickled out on a tickertape.

Carpenter's metier of preying on respectable and often socially-prominent women, which had been uncovered during the course of the trial, and which the defense had been as willing—but for different reasons—to play up as the prosecution, was what gave it the fillip of being several notches above just another underworld killing, I suppose. Anyway, half of the men around town kept whispering that it was the next man's wife, and the other half looked kind of thoughtful, as though they were doing some mental checking-up themselves.

Jimmy had been reading about it one night—that was toward the end, after it had been going on for several weeks—and he started discussing it with me.

I twiddled my thimble-sized coffee-cup around disinterestedly, looking down at it. "Do you think there really is such a woman?" I asked idly. "Or are he and his lawyer just making it up, howling for her to try to distract attention from his own guilt?"

He grimaced undecidedly, and didn't answer right away. But Jimmy is not the type who is without opinions for long. That's why he is as successful as he is. It came on so slowly I could almost see it forming before my very eyes.

First he just chewed his lip in cogitation. Then he nodded abstractedly. Finally he came out with it cautiously, "Yes. I don't know why, but I have a feeling they're telling the truth, as mealy-mouthed as they are. I wouldn't be surprised if there *was* some woman up there the night of the murder. The prosecution doesn't deny it, I notice. They just clam up each time it's brought up. That's what makes me half-inclined to believe—"

They hadn't made use of any of the back-stops Weill had prepared, up to this point, so there was still room for legitimate doubt. They hadn't even introduced the affidavits on *my* affidavit, nor had Weill taken the stand to pinch-hit for me. Perhaps they were saving the affidavits for a bang-up finish, or perhaps they weren't going to ring them in at all, having found they didn't really need them.

My chief contribution had

been to point out Sonny-Boy Nelson to them, and help them trap him, and that could be safely left out of it without damaging their case any. Otherwise what could I add? Only circumstantial strengthening to what was already an overwhelmingly strong circumstantial case.

They'd even found someone who had seen him—Nelson—run out of the house next door, his gun still unsheathed, and the door of Carpenter's apartment and the two roof-doors had been found yawning wide open.

But there was one thing I couldn't get straight in my own mind. I mentioned it aloud to Jimmy—although very carefully. "But why do Nelson and his lawyer keep harping on this woman? What do they expect to get out of that? I should think it would be the other way around, that it would harm their case rather than help it to have her—"

He shrugged. "Evidently, they have figured out some way in which they think she can help them. They must have something up their sleeves. I wouldn't know. I can't figure out what goes on in the crooked minds of shady lawyers and their clients." He pitched the paper disgustedly aside, as though the subject didn't interest him any more.

He delivered himself of a concluding postscript. "Anyway, if there is such a woman—and most likely there is—she's a fool. She should have gone to her own husband, whoever she is, and taken him into her confidence, before she got in that deep."

How easy to say, I thought poignantly. "Maybe she was afraid to," I mentioned. "Afraid he wouldn't believe her or would misunderstand—"

He gave me a scornful look as he got up, as though he thought I was a fool myself, to make a remark like that. "The right kind of a husband," he said, sauntering out to the next room, "understands everything, forgives everything. He takes care of things for her. And above all, he doesn't speak of it."

Ah yes, I thought, in theory, on paper, how well that works out. But in real life, just try it and see what cain it would raise!

He only spoke of it once again, after that. "I see he got the chair."

"Who?" I asked. I'd known since nine that morning when the first paper came into the house.

"That fellow, what's his name? Baby-Face—No, Sonny-Boy Nelson."

"He did?" I said, in polite echo.

He pretended to snap the light-switch of my room, to hurry me up.

It put me in mind, somehow, of a switch being thrown in a death-chamber.

The maid came in and said,

"There's a man at the door to see you, madam."

Something about it frightened me even before I knew of anything to be frightened about. I started up from the chair.

"Who is he?" What does he want?"

I saw her staring at me curiously, as if wondering what made me so jittery about such a trivial announcement. I tried to cover it up with a pass of my hand.

"Send him in here."

VI

I knew him by sight right away. I couldn't help wondering though, how I'd known it was going to be something like this ahead of time. I went over and closed the door. He had sense enough to wait unitl I had.

"I'm from Weill's office—" he began.

I didn't let him get any further. "He shouldn't have sent you over here like this! I thought he said I was through! What does he want now?"

"Sonny-Boy Nelson is being taken up to the Death House on the three o'clock train. He's pleading for a last chance to talk to you before he goes—"

"Then even *he* knows who I am! Is that how Weill keeps his bargains?"

"No, he doesn't know your name or anything like that. He just knows that you saw him up there, and it was through you we captured him."

"Can I reach Weill at his office? Get him for me."

I gestured toward the phone.

He nodded, stepped to the phone, and started dialing.

"Yes, ma'am. The only reason he sent me over instead of calling you himself is he thought somebody else might intercept or overhear the call." There was a pause. Then he said: "Here he is, ma'am. He was expecting you to call."

I grabbed up the phone. "Weill? What about this?" I said crisply.

"No, don't go near him, Mrs. X," Weill advised. "There's nothing to be gained by it. You are not under any obligation to him."

"Well, then why did you send someone over here to let me know about it?"

"Simply to give you your choice in the matter, to let you know he's been asking for you. But you're free to do as you please about it. If you want my opinion, there's no need for you to see him any further. He's been tried and sentenced. There's nothing you can do for him."

"But he evidently thinks there is, or he wouldn't be asking for me. And if I refuse, I suppose he'll go up there cursing me—"

"Well, let him. They all curse someone, and never the right one —themselves. Put him out of

your mind. No use being sensitive about these matters."

But he was used to dealing in them. I wasn't.

"Would there be any risk?" I asked.

"Of identification? No, none whatsoever. I'll see to that personally. But as I said before, if you want my honest opinion, I don't see any necessity for you to see him."

I went anyway. Maybe because I'm a woman. Curiosity, you know. I mean I wanted to hear what he wanted. I had to, for my own satisfaction and peace of mind. Remember, my purpose in going to the police in the first place hadn't been to secure his death. It had been to secure my own life. That had been accomplished from the moment he had been apprehended. He didn't have to be executed to advance my safety any further.

I didn't think there was anything I could do for him. Weill didn't. But he did. Why should not I at least hear what he thought it was?

I wore such a heavy veil I could hardly see through it myself. Not for Nelson's own sake. He'd already seen my face as plainly as anyone could that night up at Carpenter's. But I was determined to avoid all risk going and coming from the place. Weill's man went with me as far as the prison building. Then Weill took over himself and escorted me into the cell.

They didn't keep me outside at the mesh-barrier through which prisoners usually communicate with friends and relatives. They took me right into the cell itself, so my presence would be less likely to attract attention.

He reared up hopefully. He looked—shadowed already, by what was to come. I guess they all do, but I'd never seen one before.

He said, "How do I know if she's the right one?"

I raised the veil and left it up.

"Yeah," he said, nodding grimly. "Yeah." He turned to Weill. "Why can't Fredriggio be here? He can put it better than I can."

Weill reached to take me by the arm. "No, no lawyers or anybody else. Say what you want and be quick about it, or she leaves with me right now."

He looked at me, this time. "I want to see you alone."

"He thinks I've got you intimidated," Weill said to me caustically. He looked at me for the answer.

"All right," I said quietly.

"I'll be right outside here," he promised, "so don't be worried." He stepped out.

It's hard, I suppose, to make a plea, when your whole life has to go into it. "Look," he began awkwardly, "I dunno who you are, but you can save me. You're the only one."

"*I* can? Why do you call on me? I never said you killed Carpenter. I only said I'd seen you up there."

"I know, I know. But listen to me, only listen to me, will you? Carpenter was killed with a slug from a forty-five. Remember, they brought that out at my trail?" He called it that, "trail," the poor God-forsaken devil.

"I wasn't at your trial."

He rushed on without stopping to listen. "I got a forty-five, yes. They caught me with one on me. But they never proved that the slug they dug out of him was fired from my gun!"

I nodded in agreement. "The papers said they couldn't, from what I recall. They said that it had gone through, or at least into, a thin cigarette-case in Carpenter's pocket. That is wasn't the bullet that had pierced his heart, actually, but a fragment of the case, driven into it *by* the bullet. That the bullet itself had been flattened out, the markings destroyed by the case, so that they couldn't check it by—whatever they call that scientific method of theirs, ballistics or something. Again, why do you call on me? *I* didn't say you fired at him—"

"No, but you *didn't* say I fired at you. And that's what can save me, that's my only chance!"

"I don't under—"

He didn't actually reach out and shake me, but he made the motions with his hands. "Don't you see? Don't you see? I didn't have a chance to use my gun at all when they caught up with me. They got me without firing a shot. It was still packed the way it was that night up at Carpenter's when they took it from me. Only one bullet out of it, five still in it.

"That proves I only fired one shot that night. That shot at you on the stairs. I only thought of that now, after it was too late. If you'll only *tell* them that I fired after you out on the stairs, with only one bullet gone that'll prove it couldn't have been my shot that went into Carpenter! If you'll only *tell* them!"

"Whether she does or doesn't, that's not worth a tinker's dam!" Weill's voice suddenly grated in at us from outside the cell-opening. He must have been standing there a little to one side taking in the whole conversation. He came in again, motioned curtly to me.

"Go home, Mrs. X. Go home and forget the whole business! He could have reloaded that gun sixty times over between the time Carpenter was killed and the time we got him!"

"But the people in the building only heard the one shot!" Nelson shrilled. "They said so, all of them—"

"Because only one was fired on the outside, where they could hear it. The other one was fired inside Carpenter's flat, where

they couldn't. That's no good to you at all!" He took me by the arm, politely but authoritatively. "Come on, Mrs. X. Don't waste any more of your time in here. What a nerve this bird has! He tried to kill *you* with the very shot he's speaking of. Now he's trying to turn that shot around and use it to his advantage, with your help!"

Back in his office he said to me, "So he got under your skin with that, didn't he? I can tell that by looking at you. That's what he wanted to do."

"But he did fire at me on the stairs," I murmured.

"Then why didn't we come across the bullet imbedded somewhere along them?"

"It may have gone out through the slit of an open window. I passed one, I remember—"

He fanned a hand at me, as if the whole suggestion were ridiculous. "Did you ever deny that he fired at you?"

"No."

"Were you ever even given a chance to *say* whether or not he had?"

"No."

"Then go home and forget about it. I wouldn't let you destroy your home for that rat if I could. His dirty hide's been quadruply forfeited to the State. The whole thing's splitting hairs, in a way, isn't it? They can't execute him, up there where he's going, more than once for one murder. We already had him down on the books for three others.

"If he'd happened to be acquitted of this particular one he was tried for just now, d'you suppose that would have meant he would have been let go? Not on your life! He would have simply been tried over again for one of the others, and sentenced to death anyway."

VII

The execution-notice was tiny, and tucked away so far back within the paper you would have missed it a dozen times over unless you happened to be specifically looking for it.

Well, he was gone now. What was the good of wondering *could* I have saved him? Weill had said he wouldn't have let me even if I could. And he hadn't been thinking entirely of my own personal welfare, either. The police want their victories, too. They work hard for them and they're only human. Justice isn't an exact science. It's only relative. It's more than just a matter of subtracting the total number of bullets found left in a gun, and then proclaiming a man innocent if there's one over. Justice asks: Was there murder in the heart of the man who held that gun? Had he murdered before? Did he try to murder once more, even when his bullet missed, and went out through an open window?

And I couldn't have saved him, I saw that now. My evidence wouldn't have been enough to get him off. On the contrary, it might have had quite the reverse effect, might even have added strength to the case against him. For if he had been willing to shoot me down to keep it from being known that he had been there, didn't that argue that he had far more than just trespassing to cover up? That he had a just-previous murder to cover up, in fact?

I would only have blackened my whole future, and he still would have been electrocuted tonight. I'd saved myself from an act of incredible folly.

I moved my arm, resting on the dresser-top, and his death went where his life had gone—into the wastebasket.

I went ahead dressing for the evening.

No, no earrings. I didn't have to be told that there was only one earring left. My heart knew that by heart. I picked it up, and there was something the matter with my eyes. There was still another one lying in the box!

It brought on an attack of vertigo, or something very close to it. I had to stiff-arm myself against the edge of the dresser and just hang on, until it had passed.

Jimmy was dressed, waiting for me outside in the other room. I came out to him, box and all.

"Who put this left earring back? I thought I'd lost it."

He looked at it puzzledly himself for a moment. Then I saw his face clear. "Oh, I remember now. Why, I put it back myself. You were out at the time."

I swallowed. "I haven't opened the case since that night I was out with the Perrys."

I could see him trying to think back.

"Well, that must have been the time. Whatever night it was, I remember I'd stayed up all night doing my income-tax. Then I went out to stretch my legs, get a little fresh air, and just as I got back I ran into the milkman. He was standing there by our door, all excited about something. He came running to me.

"Mr. Shaw, look what I just found inside the empty bottle at your door. There was a note curled up in the neck of it, funnel-shaped you know, and that caught it and held it."

"Then when I went to our room with it, I saw that you had not come back yet, you were still out. So I put it back in the box and went to sleep. You must have lost it right on your way out, as you left the door."

He stopped and glanced at me. "You've got the funniest look on your face. What're you thinking about?"

"Oh, nothing." I turned and went to get my wrap. "I was just thinking," I added over my shoul-

der, "how funny life is. Whatever this play is about that we're going to see tonight, it can't match real life for its thrills, its ups and downs, its crazy, unbelievable quirks."

I was lying awake later thinking about it, living the whole thing through all over again. I remembered now how I'd had to shake my key, trying to get it in the door, the first time I'd come back. That was what had loosened it, made it drop off.

And I remembered now, I'd even heard the funny little plink of glass it made going in the bottle-mouth. Only at the time I thought it was the tip of my shoe that had grazed it. If I'd only taken the trouble to bend down and look!

All that agony, all that suspense, all that fear, for nothing. I hadn't needed to go back to Carpenter's a second time!

Well, the milkman was an honest man. That was about the only consolation I could derive from the whole thing. Even if Jimmy had given him something at the time he found the earring, he deserved a little extra bonus.

I looked across the room and I saw by the radium clock-dial that the night was nearly gone, and it was about his usual time for covering his route and making a delivery at the door. On an impulse I got up, put something over me, took two ten-dollar bills out of the bureau, and went out to our front door.

I was just in time.

"Bill, here's something for you, for finding that earring of mine, that time." I tried to tuck it into his hand. He wouldn't open it.

"What earring, Mrs. Shaw?"

"You know, the one that had dropped into the empty milk-bottle out here at the door. My diamond earring—"

He was an honest man, all right. "No, ma'am, I never found any diamond earring of yours. I never found any diamond earring of *anybody's*. I'd sure remember it if I had."

The distance from there to our bedroom wasn't so great. It took me a long time to cover it, though.

I stood looking at Jimmy. His hand was sticking out over the edge of the mattress, the way a person's sometimes does when he is asleep. I reached down and put my own over it and gently clasped it, in a sort of wordless pact.

Something that he'd once said came back to me. "The right kind of a husband understands everything, forgives everything. He takes care of things for her. And above all, he doesn't speak of it."

And, Weill had told me, they'd already wanted Sonny-Boy Nelson for three other killings; were looking for him anyway.

as the inspector said

by . . . Cyril Hare

She was sure the police would blame the viciousness of a killer at large for her husband's death. But there's many a tragic slip—

THE MOST astute of criminologists would have been unable to determine precisely when Charles Darrell and Sonia French made up their minds to murder Sonia's husband, Robert. A murder plan, like an engagement to marry, is sometimes agreed upon by the parties concerned long before the impulses underlying it can be given verbal expression. In the situation in which Charles and Sonia found themselves, for persons of their peculiar psychological endowments, murder was the obvious solution. Now it was merely a question of finding a suitable opportunity to carry it out.

Sonia and Robert had been incompatibly married for ten years. The meek little man was nearly twice Sonia's age, and almost from the first she had treated him with a bored contempt which he—absorbed as he was in his books and his collections of silver and porcelain—seemed hardly to notice.

She had known Charles Darrell for six months and they had been lovers for four. Now, un-

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Cyril Hare's mystery stories have been given a high priority rating for their literary excellence by one of the most celebrated—and severely judicious—of English critics. He has an amazing talent for extracting the kernel of a chillingly devious crime conundrum with a deft flick of a scalpel—precisely as you or I might extract the meat from a walnut with a little silver pick at a family banquet in midwinter. And here's a kernel which truly glitters!

fortunately, people were beginning to talk, and things were rapidly moving toward a crisis. They both knew it could only be a matter of time before Robert became aware of the situation. Sonia had learned from experience that beneath his mild detachment lurked a rock-like obstinacy on certain matters—and that divorce was one of them. More important, neither she nor Charles had financial resources of their own. Robert, on the other hand, was independently wealthy, and the proceeds of his collections alone would provide enough for his widow and his successor.

Ironically enough, it was a policeman who presented them with the ideal method of achieving their purpose. The local inspector called one evening at French's house, when Charles had dropped in for his usual afternoon visit on his way home from work, in the outwardly innocent role of a family friend. The officer had come with a warning. There had been a number of carefully planned burglaries in the district recently, and the lawbreaker was still at large.

"We know who the man is," he said, "and we're certain to catch up with him eventually. But it may take some time, as two of our best officers are on the sick list, and a third has been temporarily transferred to another district. The man we suspect is dangerous. He always carries a gun, and we know he has at least one murder to his credit, although we can't prove it.

"Now this house, Mr. French, is in a rather isolated position. Except for Mr. Darrell, you have no near neighbors. You can hardly deny that there are valuables here which would make this place very attractive from a burglar's point of view. I strongly urge, therefore, that you take precautions, especially since you have no servants."

Robert cleared his throat in the way that never failed to grate on Sonia's nerves. "Er—what sort of precautions had you in mind?" he asked.

"Well—if I were you, sir, I would certainly begin by buying a reliable watch dog."

"I don't like dogs," said Robert flatly.

"Then I suggest for the time being, while our dangerous friend is still at large that you take your valuables to the bank for safe keeping. The silver in this room alone, for instance—"

Robert looked round the room, impressively adorned with the fruits of years of ardent collecting. His faded eyes seemed to brighten as they dwelt on one priceless piece after another.

"Put all of this in a vault—for heaven knows how long!" he exclaimed. "I'm afraid I couldn't do that."

"Well, sir," said the inspector rather tartly, "don't say I didn't warn you, that's all." And he took his departure.

After he had gone, Charles said in the deep, vibrant voice that contrasted so markedly with Robert's precise, almost tremulous enunciation, "Well, the inspector didn't bother to warn *me*. I guess he knows I've nothing worth stealing. But if this gunman of his did visit me by mistake, I'm pretty sure he would live to regret it. I've still got my army revolver and I wouldn't think twice about using it."

He rose and stretched himself, a tall, straight figure of such magnificent masculinity that Sonia did not trouble to conceal the admiration in her face.

"I'd feel sorry for any burglar who made the mistake of trying to rob you, Charles," she said. "Robert, what would you do if I woke you up in the middle of the night and told you that someone was making off with your precious silver? Put your head under the bedclothes and pretend you hadn't heard?"

"On the contrary, I should come straight downstairs," French said firmly.

"You'd be much too frightened to do anything of the sort."

"I'd be frightened, naturally. But there is always a reasonable chance that the intruder would be equally frightened. Housebreaking must be a nerve-racking business. Besides, he might be amenable to reason. If I could make him understand how small the value of this silver would be when melted down compared to—"

"Robert, you are ridiculous!"

"Perhaps I am, Sonia. But you asked me what I would do, and I gave you an honest answer. Now, if you will excuse me, I have some sale catalogues I want to look over before dinner. Give Charles a drink before he goes."

He shuffled off to his study, leaving the two together. Before the first cocktail glass had been drained, the plan for Robert French's extinction had been perfected . . .

Three nights later Sonia lay awake in the room which—to her disgust—Robert still insisted on sharing with her. The illuminated hands of her wrist-watch pointed to ten minutes to two. Ten minutes to wait before the time agreed upon for Charles to make his entry.

She strained her ears in the darkness, every nerve in her body tense with excitement. Above the deep breathing of her husband in the twin bed beside her own she fancied that she could hear stealthy sounds—the creak of a door in a room downstairs, a light footfall on a loose board in the hall. But even as she heard them she knew that her imagination was playing her false.

A bat flew past the window,

echoing the noise of an unoiled tallboy at the end of the room cracking its joints in the dark as she had so often heard it do in the long hours of sleepless nights. She set her teeth and composed herself to watch and wait while the hands of the watch crept slowly on.

Finally, punctual to the minute, the sound she was awaiting reached her. This time there could be no mistake. There was the tinkle of breaking glass, followed by the groan of a window being pushed up. In the silence of the sleeping house the sound was as startling as a clap of thunder in her ears. But Robert slept on as peacefully as ever. She waited a little longer, listening for the thud of Charles's feet as he landed inside the window, and then she leaped out of bed to play her part.

"Robert!" She shook him violently by the shoulder. "Robert, wake up! There's somebody downstairs!"

Robert half-rose, struggling reluctantly into wakefulness.

"What's that?" he murmured. "Someone downstairs? Sonia, you're imagining things! Just because that inspector—Good Lord!" He sat up straight in bed. "You're right, I think. I can hear the fellow moving about. I'd better go down—"

Reluctantly, but without hesitation, he swung his thin legs to the floor, groped for his slippers, put on his shabby grey dressing-gown and went out of the room.

Alone in the dark, Sonia waited breathlessly for what she knew must follow. She waited for what seemed to her an unendurably long time. Then everything seemed to happen at once. There was the snap of a switch and a faint glow of electric light showed beneath the bedroom door.

Almost at the same instant she heard a startled exclamation in her husband's voice, cut short by an explosion that echoed through the house. Then, in such appallingly rapid sequence that each sound seemed to blend into the next, a heavy fall, a door being flung violently open and the patter of flying feet on the gravel path outside.

She let the footsteps die into the distance before she made the next move. Charles must have time to make his getaway before she called the police. But it would be unsafe to wait too long, in the event that some stray passer-by had heard the shot. Determinedly she switched on her bedside lamp and got out of bed. Now that it was all over, she felt strangely calm, even exhilarated.

As she crossed the room her thoughts raced ahead of her. She knew in advance just what she would say to the police, what her attitude at the inquest would be. How soon, she wondered,

could she marry Charles without exciting comment? Would six months be long enough? They would go to Italy for their honeymoon. She had always wanted to see Venice . . .

As she reached the door it opened in her face and Robert shuffled in.

"Robert!" she gasped. For a long moment she could say nothing else. She could only stare at him in terrified apprehension. He returned her stare in silence—pale, disheveled but indubitably alive.

"What—what happened?" she faltered.

Sonia's husband cleared his throat.

"He got away," he said. "I'm afraid he's taken a lot of stuff with him—some of my best pieces. I ought to have taken that inspector's advice and sent it to the bank. It was foolish of me—"

"But I heard a shot. I thought you—you're not hurt, Robert?"

"No, Sonia, I'm not hurt," he assured her. "But I'm afraid I must prepare you for some bad news. It's Charles. He must have been watching, and with his customary courage and loyalty followed the man in, to protect us. He—he's at the foot of the stairs. I'm afraid there is nothing we can do for him. He—"

Sonia pitched forward in a dead faint.

With some difficulty Robert managed to lift his wife from the floor and lay her on the bed. Then he made his way downstairs again. As he reached the foot of the staircase he had to walk over the body which lay huddled close to the bottom step. He did so without a tremor, glancing down only to avoid the pool of blood which was spreading slowly over the hall carpet.

But when he passed into the dining-room and looked once more at the sideboard, swept so disastrously bare of its treasures of silver plate, there were tears of emotion in his eyes.

He closed the door softly and went into his study. The telephone was there and he had to communicate with the police. But before doing so, he was careful to clean and oil the little pistol in his dressing-gown pocket and lock it away in his desk. Having eliminated the disturbance from his well-ordered life, he was naturally anxious to avoid further trouble for himself. As the inspector said, it was well to take precautions.

Civic corruption has its own special appeal to mystery lovers everywhere. When that corruption is triggered by a baby-innocent mayor, a pretty girl and a singular scoundrel the Saint has a field day in THE WELL-MEANING MAYOR. *You won't want to miss this exciting Charteris yarn in our very next issue.*

ready money

by . . . John Falkner

His job was a very rewarding one. Just by greasing crime's highway he met the most unusual people.

IF YOU'VE ever allowed yourself to believe that crooks are only interested in million-dollar swindles you were never more mistaken in your life! Mostly they just dream of something big, like the lad at the races who keeps hoping the next hundred-in-one shot will prove a miracle winner on a wet track.

Meantime they all live on money that arrives in less spectacular fashion—the singles and five spots; sometimes the fifties, less often the crisp century notes.

And the *average* thief preys on the *average* man. The wealthy society matron and the big industrialist are usually safe.

Take that spring when I was in Atlantic City on a job planned to last me a week. I didn't want to draw attention to myself—you don't in my profession—so I left the hotels alone and settled for a rooming house. And an attractive comfortable rooming house it was, with ordinary, comfortable people in it. Not wealthy enough, you'd think, to merit the attention of an accomplished professional like myself.

The name Falkner, however you spell it, has a magic all its own, even when the author in question isn't William, and is not a Nobel Prize winner. We rather suspect that William Faulkner would chuckle over this yarn, for there's a caustic wit in the telling of it that is distinctly Faulkner-esque. Anyway, we're sure you'll find it highly entertaining, a little gem of a short-short.

There was Mrs. Hanson, middle-aged and loquacious, whose husband had left her the house and nothing else. There was only one thing she could do—take in roomers. Now, she called them "my family."

When I went there the "family" consisted of the Miss Weatherheads, elderly spinsters whose father had been a bishop; a couple of students at some technical college; an actor, a one-time Hollywood extra, and a middle-aged couple named Conway.

Conway had won a couple of thousand on the Irish Sweepstakes and had come up to stay with Mrs. Hanson—an old friend of his wife—for a holiday.

Finally, there was Mr. Miles; a shy, gentle-voiced little guy. He didn't say much about himself, but let it be known he was a traveler.

All too ordinary to interest me professionally? Think again! Such a group of citizens were most engaging prospects.

Mr. Miles interested me especially. I had seen his face before but, for the moment, I couldn't place it. In my job, if you forget faces for too long, you are likely to be in serious trouble.

I remembered it quickly enough, however, on the first Friday evening I was with the "family." We were having coffee in the dining-room when the doorbell rang. Mrs. Hanson answered it, and then invited the caller to join us.

"There's a gentleman to see—" She didn't get any further. Miles took one look at the tall man behind her, pushed back his chair and made a dash for the window. He did not reach it because the stranger had long legs and knew how to use them.

The whole room was in an uproar. Plates clattered, chairs went flying and the Misses Weatherhead reached for their smelling salts. I was the only one of the "family" to remain seated. I knew now who Miles was. And right at that moment he was cowering in the newcomer's grasp.

The tall man apologized. "Sorry I had to burst in on you like this," he said. "My name's Reece. Lieutenant of Detectives Reece. I've been looking for this man for some time. I had to move quickly. You've just seen why."

One of the Miss Weatherheads said, "Oh, dear." The ham Thespian asked in his best Shakespearean voice: "What has the miscreant been doing, Inspector?"

Reece said abruptly: "He's been passing counterfeit bills. He goes all over the country, getting rid of a few here and there. He's not greedy. He's content to make a few thousand a year." Reece's aquiline features twisted in a grin. "Nice living—income tax-free, of course."

Mrs. Hanson began wringing her hands. "He seemed such a respectable gentleman," she said.

"He couldn't swing it if he wasn't," Reece told her. He looked around at the "family." "Have any of you received any money from him in bills?"

Mrs. Hanson said, "He just settled with me for the week." Emily Weatherhead had given him folding money for one of the bills. The actor had split a fifty into smaller—and genuine—components.

Reece said, "We'll have to straighten this out. You'd better let me have all the ready money in the house. He may have slipped into your rooms and done some substituting."

We had a round-up and gave Reece the result. They looked attractive in neat piles on the table. Reece counted each one and gave the owners a receipt.

"I'll have to take this to headquarters for testing—to find out which of the bills are counterfeit," Reece went on. "You'll get the genuine ones back."

Six hundred and thirty-seven dollars, fifty of them mine. Reece had them in one hand and Miles in the other when I took up my stand just in front of the door.

"Just a minute!" I exclaimed. Then, looking significantly at the two hefty young students, I ordered, "Those men are both crooks. Grab them!" There was some confusion, but it all ended with the students, the actor and Mr. Conway effectively surrounding Reece and Miles.

"Lieutenant of Detectives Reece indeed!" I exclaimed. "They're as interested in crime as I am. The difference is my job is to protect the public, not fleece it." I flashed a police badge. Then I snatched the money from Reece and thumbed through it. "All genuine, unless I'm very much mistaken. They'd have walked off with it."

Mrs. Hanson sat down suddenly and mopped her forehead. "I'm very glad you were here," she told me.

I said, "Look after them. They're tricky customers. I'll go and phone the station for a cruise car."

I went out—straight out into the street—and nobody noticed that I had the money with me. I've often wondered how long they stood in the living-room waiting for me to return.

Eventually one of the "family" must have gone for the police. Tough luck on Marty Reece and his pal, of course. But there's no such thing as sentiment in business, is there?

I'd made six hundred and thirty-seven dollars profit, less the fifty of my own and the suitcase of conservative clothes I'd had to leave behind.

Doesn't make you feel like working for a living, does it?

one night in paris

by . . . Walter B. Gibson

To Gerard and the police of Paris the secret of Lebrun's treasure room was more alarming than a corpse stretched out in shadows.

THE HAZE of an early Spring dusk clung over the Gare de Lyon when the Great Gerard and his blonde assistant, Mimi, detrained at the end of a swift ten-hour ride from Marseille. They had lunched in the *wagon restaurant* of the *train rapide* and now Mimi was casting an envious eye toward the *Buffet Gastronomique*.

"Imagine," commented Gerard Whitestone with a whimsical smile, "dining in a station restaurant upon arrival in Paris! Going away, yes, but not coming in, with a whole world of restaurants to choose from! I'll check our luggage, Mimi, while you list a few of your favorite eating spots. We have until midnight."

"*Only* until midnight?" said Mimi. "Why, our show doesn't open at the Olympia until next Tuesday, remember?" The blonde paused, puckered her forehead and followed with an understanding nod. "I should have known it! Cutting our vacation on the Riviera three days

A brand new Great Gerard novelette would be a "literary catch" in any mystery editor's lexicon. It is especially one in ours, for having featured Walter Gibson's famed magician-turned-sleuth in a widely popular Italian adventure we'd have been facing a round robin of censure if we had failed to persuade the author to come up with a Parisian sequel. Mr. Gibson has written many fine and ingenious detective stories. But seldom has violent death in a city of mystery guided his pen in a manner as chilling as this.

short, just because you had a sudden yearning for Paris in the Springtime! So what's happening at midnight?"

"A press conference," said Gerard, "at the home of the Chevalier Pinetti in the Allee des Bijoux. I'll tell you about it while we ride there in a cab, after I direct the driver."

The cabby needed direction. Even Gerard's most fluent French could not convince him that there was a street in Paris called the Alle des Bijoux. So Gerard told him to swing across the Ponte d'Austerlitz and work northwestward from the Boulevard Marcel.

"Pinetti was a famous magician of the late Eighteenth Century," Gerard told Mimi as they rode along. "About twenty years ago, Pinetti's house and much of his magical paraphernalia were acquired and restored by a magician named Eugene Lebrun—"

"Why, he's a circus performer!" interrupted Mimi. "I saw Lebrun at Madison Square Garden, doing a juggling act on a tight-rope."

"But magic is his great love," Gerard assured her. "Don't you remember him tossing a pack of playing cards in air, jabbing a sword among them and impaling three that had been chosen by the audience?"

Mimi nodded as Gerard imitated the thrust of an imaginary sword in mid-air.

"That's magic," said Gerard, "and Lebrun not only does it on a tight-rope. He uses an ordinary sword, not the trick kind."

"But he's still a circus performer," argued Mimi, "so why didn't he give Pinetti's apparatus to the Ringling Museum?"

"Because he needed a reason to be in Paris," explained Gerard, "and particularly during the War. He couldn't move his priceless collection, so he stayed here with it. He was even accused of collaborating with the Nazis, so they would let him keep his treasures."

"And was Lebrun a collaborator?"

"Ostensibly, yes. It helped him fulfill his real mission, which was working for the French Underground. When he finally left Paris, under a Nazi safe conduct, he had his treasure room sheathed with steel, fitted with bullet-proof glass and locked with a vault door, so that enraged Parisians could not take out their anger by destroying his collection of old-time magic."

Mimi noted Gerard's smile by the lights of the Boulevard Marcel and added a comment: "There must have been a catch to that."

"There was," said Gerard. "Actually, the attack-proof room served as headquarters for the Underground during Lebrun's absence. Meanwhile, Lebrun was traveling in allied countries, pos-

ing as a refugee, talking endlessly about his wonderful collection and hoping that the Nazis hadn't destroyed or stolen it. But nobody particularly believed him. Like many undercover agents, he was labeled as a highly doubtful character."

The case intrigued Mimi. She wanted to hear more and Gerard told it, while he watched for landmarks along the streets that the cab was threading, now that it had left the boulevard.

"After the war," declared the magician, "Lebrun was given a clean bill of health and he went on tour with the circus. Between times, he worked for the French government, checking subversive activities. Those have become hotter and hotter, as you may know. Lebrun has become a very busy bee, visiting the dozens of commie cells in the Parisian honeycomb alone."

"That can't be very healthy for Lebrun."

"Nor for anyone who knows him. Such people are under suspicion from all sides. And that is why I insisted on a quick and outright deal when Lebrun sold me his treasures at a bargain price."

"But suppose he should take a notion to drop into his old curio room and use it as an occasional headquarters during your absence?"

"He can't," replied Gerard. "You'll see why when we get there. I believe this is the street."

Gerard called for the taxi to stop in front of a cobblestoned cul-de-sac which he defined as the Allee des Bijoux. Gerard and Mimi alighted and entered the dead end by the light of a single ancient lamppost. The blind alley terminated in a grilled gate, where steps led up to a formidable front door of a very old and solid house.

As they ascended, Mimi gazed curiously down another flight of steps to a basement door which bore a huge padlock. Gerard's gaze, always quick to pick up a lead, followed the blonde's.

"That's where Leon the concierge lives," explained Gerard, "when he's around—which isn't often."

Gerard unlocked the front door with a big key, found a light switch and illuminated a long hallway flanked on the left by a solid dividing wall between this house and the next. On the right was a parlor where Gerard pressed another light switch, causing Mimi to cry out in admiration.

The front room was beautifully furnished and decorated in Louis Quinze style, a glitter of gilt and curlicues, resplendent beneath a huge crystal chandelier which had been converted from candle power to electricity. Mimi's gaze roved from chaise lounge to mantel clock, then to

an ornate console and a geegawed footstool beside it.

Finally, her eyes centered on the rich, tufted carpeting that floored the room from wall to wall, continuing beneath a pair of silken curtains hanging from a wide arch at the back of the room.

Slipping one stockingless foot from its pump, Mimi began testing the thick, seamless nap with her bare toes.

Gerard intoned in guidebook style: "You are now viewing the reception room of the famous conjuror Jean-Joseph Pinetti Willedal de Merci, Chevalier of the Order of St. Phillipe, and Professor of Mathematics and Physics at the Royal Academy of Sciences and Belles-Lettres of Bordeaux, Aeronaut and Geographical Engineer."

Gerard took a deep breath and added: "This is where he received visitors to observe his philosophical recreations and demonstrations, as they called scientific gadgets in those days."

Mimi gasped in new amazement. "You mean Pinetti really gave performances here?"

"Probably," smiled Gerard, "if this house was built as early as 1785, when the Chevalier was all the rage of Paris. I'm taking Lebrun's word for it and I hope the Parisian press will do the same. At midnight, I shall reveal the antique apparatus used by Pinetti and demonstrate his famous opening trick, which I shall use in our own show at the Olympia, beginning next Tuesday."

"So that's the tie-in," nodded Mimi. "I wondered when we would be getting back to business. But since you're not meeting the reporters until midnight, why are we here so early?"

"For a rehearsal, Mimi. I have the trick all set up, but I want to make sure it works."

"And where is all this marvelous apparatus?"

"In the back room, beyond those curtains."

Mimi stalked across the lush carpeting and drew aside the portieres to find a pair of sliding doors locked tight. She swung about with the query: "Do you have the key?"

"No key will do," said Gerard. "Those doors are permanently closed with a sheet of steel backing them."

Mimi glanced down at the tufted carpeting that seemed to spring up like grass whenever she moved her foot. "But the carpeting goes on through to the other room."

"Naturally," said Gerard. "It is at least fifty years old and as fine and elegant as when it was new. I know, because the old concierge told me. Lebrun simply closed the doors and re-enforced them with armor plate. You'll see from the other side."

Gerard conducted Mimi out into the hall and along it to a

door to the rear room. This door gave with a metallic sound when Gerard tapped it. It was fitted with heavy hasp and staple, linked with a padlock that had five circular segments, each bearing all the letters of the alphabet.

"A French letter lock," said Gerard. "The very one that Houdini used on a pair of handcuffs when he challenged the German escape artist, Engleberto Kleppini in Dortmund on the night of June eighteenth, Nineteen hundred and two. Kleppini never did get out of them. He thought he had the right word, but Houdini switched it."

"You turn to the right letters," said Mimi, "and the lock opens. There must be millions of combinations."

"There are," said Gerard. "That's why I put it on the door after I bought the collection from Lebrun a few months ago. We can be positive of one thing. No one can possibly have entered this room since then. Now let's get on with the rehearsal. It's going to surprise you."

Gerard turned the letters to form the word LOTUS. The door opened smoothly and Mimi saw a bulky array of magical apparatus looming in the last rays of sunset that filtered in through the frosted panes of a huge rear window.

"Pinetti's greatest trick," said Gerard, "was lighting a hundred candles instantly, by a single gunshot!"

He plucked an old-fashioned pistol from inside the door, aimed it into the room and fired. From everywhere, tiny tongues of flames licked into life, all set in candelabra about the room.

Mimi gasped in surprise as Gerard turned and bowed, his face gaining a Mephistophelean gleam in the medley of flickers and shadows.

Then, Mimi's astonishment changed to horror. She was looking to Gerard's left and as he followed her gaze, he saw a man's figure lying face up in front of a fourfold Chinese screen. He swayed and almost dropped the pistol as he recognized the long, thin features of Eugene Lebrun, the collector who had stocked this room with its magical curiosa.

From his pained expression, Lebrun must have regretted the time he had wasted learning to perform the card catching trick with an ordinary sword. Driven through his body, half way to its hilt, was his favorite blade, projecting from the blood-dyed front of his tuxedo shirt.

II

Gerard's face remained taut in the flickery light. With a quick spring, he reached the screen and swept it aside in one motion, wheeling about to level the

antique pistol toward the space beyond. But there was no one crouching there, nor any hiding place. Nothing but the sheet of stainless steel that blocked the archway with the double doors.

The floor was covered with the same thick carpeting that continued beneath the steel barrier into the front reception room, without the slightest space showing in the unruffled surface of its tufted texture. Continuing his turnabout, Gerard covered the remainder of the room.

All about was an array of old style magical paraphernalia which included a large crystal clock dial, a miniature orange tree, a transparent glass casket, small draped tables, odd-shaped vases and decanters, devil's heads and midget automatic figures, but nowhere was there space enough for an assassin to be hidden.

Gerard relaxed and beckoned Mimi into the room. He stepped over, closed the hallway door and pressed a light switch. As the electric glow drowned the candlelight, Gerard picked up two small metal cones and handed one to Mimi.

"Start snuffing the candles," he told the frozen blonde, "before they smoke the place out. I'll show you how to fix them for the midnight demonstration. It won't take long."

Mechanically, Mimi followed the instructions that Gerard gave. The magician, meanwhile, began moving apparatus from beside the wall, even taking down some of the framed playbills that almost covered it. He wanted to make sure the walls were as solid as the steel sheet that blocked the archway. They proved to be exactly that.

Gerard turned his attention to the rear of the curio room where the casement windows formed the only route by which Lebrun's murderer could have left. Again, Gerard drew a complete blank. The sections of the window were most formidable of all.

"Bullet proof glass," said Gerard, as he tapped the frosted panes, "and solid steel bars between."

From his pocket, Gerard drew a pair of thin white gloves which he wore during the unique coin manipulative act that he alone performed while gloved. He pulled them on his hands, so that his deft fingers could probe the panes for cracks without leaving prints. Finally, he tested the window clamps, which were connected to sliding bars. All were tightly screwed in place.

"Nobody used the window route," said Gerard. "This is a perfect sealed room mystery."

"But maybe Lebrun brought someone here," said Mimi. "Someone who killed him and went out, then spun the letters on the lock."

"Except," said Gerard, "that the lock happens to be my own

and Lebrun did not know the combination. How he got in is just as puzzling as how the other man left!"

"But what could anyone gain, setting up a scene like this?"

"Plenty. If I'd brought the press here at midnight, as I planned, it would have pinned the crime on me. In fact"—Gerard's expression went grim—"it still could pin the crime on me as the only person who could have entered this room, because I can't pass up that midnight meeting."

Gerard stooped beside Lebrun's body and ran through the dead man's pockets for some clue. He found nothing. The pockets had been emptied, even Lebrun's *pochettes* or secret pockets, which Gerard as a fellow-magician knew exactly where to find.

During that last stage of the search, Mimi, wincing as Lebrun's body gave a lifelike sway under Gerard's slight lift, exclaimed hoarsely: "Wait—there's something underneath him!"

With a dart of her hand, Mimi brought out the object. It was a magical playbill, the sort that Lebrun, when alive, would have added to the hundreds that adorned the walls. But this particular program, printed in antique type, took on a peculiarly macabre significance. It read:

CABARET DE LA MORT
Soiree Fantastique

Under that was a line in Latin that Gerard translated: "All hope abandon, ye who enter here." The program was decorated with ghosts, skeletons, tombstones and other symbols of death.

"I've heard of this place," said Gerard. "A lot of others have imitated it. This is the old original, and its reputation has become legendary."

He paused; the paper had a fresh feel, the antique printing a phony look. He pointed to the bottom lines:

Ce programme pour Mardi, le Septieme d'Avril. Les portes ouvrirent a neuf heures.

"This program for Tuesday, April Seventh," translated Mimi. "Why, that's today!"

"Read further," said Gerard, "and you'll find that the doors open at nine o'clock. That won't be for another hour or more. This playbill isn't from the past, like all the others in this room. It's from the future!"

From her expression, Mimi accepted the thing as totally incredible but Gerard had a simpler explanation.

"A plant," he said. "Fixed for Lebrun's body to be found at midnight in a room that I alone could have entered. With a piece of evidence"—he gestured to the playbill—"to prove that the body must have been brought here after nine o'clock by somebody from the Cabaret de la Mort in the Montmartre. This is one

sealed room mystery that makes sense—the wrong way."

"And what," asked Mimi, "will you do about it?"

For answer, Gerard slid the incriminating playbill back beneath Lebrun's body. Still wearing his gloves, he went to the window and loosened a casement clamp, very slightly. From a cabinet in the corner that was marked APPARAUX MODERNE, he brought a compact tool-kit titled: HOUDINI—INSTRUMENTS AUTHENTIQUE. From these, Gerard selected a miniature jimmy, narrow-pointed, of finely tempered steel.

"The sort of thing," Gerard told Mimi, "that Houdini smuggled into boxes with him, to pry his way out."

Gerard ushered Mimi past Lebrun's body to the hallway. He turned out the light, closed the curio room door and spun the letters of the lock. Using a flashlight, he found the stairs to the basement, where he picked up a ladder and carried it along through the back door, which he locked behind him. Planting the ladder against a tiny balcony, Gerard climbed to the curio room window.

From below, Mimi watched him work at the twilight tinted panes. With the jimmy, Gerard pried a window inward, then worked it tightly shut again. He rejoined Mimi, took the ladder and slid it from sight beyond a next door fence.

"Thanks to the loosened window clamp," said Gerard, "the jimmy job will look genuine enough."

"You should have pried a smaller casement," said Mimi. "You could have gone through this, but nobody your size could go through one of the smaller ones."

"Neither could Lebrun," said Gerard, "and I want to make it look as though he went through the window—whether he was dead or alive. Now let's clear this neighborhood, quietly and inconspicuously."

By the time they had covered half a mile on foot, the tangy air had restored Mimi's appetite and she brought up the restaurant question, to which Gerard nodded.

"We'll wangle over to the Boul Mich," the magician decided, "and take a cab to the Cabaret de la Mort. I want to see what goes on there. First, we'll go to a little hotel I remember, the Stellaire. We'll phone the cabaret from the hotel.

Apparently the cabaret had not opened, for it took Gerard three tries at five-minute intervals to get a reply. Then, Mimi heard him purr in his smoothest French: "La Cabaret de la Mort? You are open? You have a reservation in my name—the Great

Gerard? Yes, for myself alone. *Ah, excellent.* I shall be there."

Twilight was purpling into night as Gerard and Mimi sped northward in a cab across the Pont Neuf toward the Place Pigalle, near which the Cabaret de la Mort was located.

"The plant thickens," said Gerard. "A reservation in my name at the Cabaret de la Mort simply clinches the trail that already leads from there."

"Except that you might produce an alibi."

"For my first night back in Paris?" Gerard inserted a laugh. "You'd never expect me to give a precise account of my peregrinations, would you, Mimi?"

"Whatever those are," said Mimi, "I guess I wouldn't. You have a fantastic way of bobbing in and out, faster than I vanish or reappear from an illusion cabinet. But an alibi would still be a good idea."

"I'll remember that, Mimi."

III

The Cabaret de la Mort proved to be a typical Montmartre deadfall with some appropriate refinements if a *motif* based upon the gruesome could be so classified.

Over the entrance, six steps down, burned an eternal blue-flamed light that gave off an odor of brimstone. A bearded character robed as Father Time greeted the customers and guided them along a passage where sudden ruddy flickers promised a view of some hellish pit. A girl with painted smile and vampire costume met them and croaked a request for reservations.

Gerard shook his head and said that he had none. They were looking now into the cabaret itself, where chandeliers were formed from skulls and crossbones and the tables bore a striking similarity to morgue slabs. Sizing the place as he would a theater, Gerard spotted a table deep in a corner and decided it must be the one reserved in his name. He gestured the other direction.

"A table over there will do, Lady Dracula," he said.

From their table, Gerard and Mimi gained a good view of the stage, which was decorated like the interior of a crypt, with a pair of hanging curtains that resembled shrouds.

"I'd like to go back stage," said Gerard, "and see what's behind those drops."

"Pull a sneak whenever you want," said Mimi, "and I'll promise not to tell if you'll only order me some dinner first. I'm hungry enough to eat a horse."

"Did you say horse?" Gerard beckoned to a skeleton-clad waiter. "Or hearse? You'll probably find both on the menu."

Mimi grimaced as she read the horrendous titles given to

ordinary dishes on the bill-of-fare. Gerard, meanwhile, was asking the waiter about the evening's entertainment.

"You will find it all on the program, M'sieu," the living skeleton told him. "I think they have just arrived from the printer. Ah, *oui.*" He nodded as the vampire lady approached with a stack of printed sheets. "Here they are."

Gerard studied the program as though he'd never seen it before though its exact duplicate was lying under Lebrun's body in the curio room.

"*La danse des squelettes,*" he read aloud. "The dance of the skeletons—about on a par with singing waiters. Next on the bill—ah, this is interesting!—is an invitation for anyone to visit the grave beyond the shrouding curtains and test their fate for themselves."

"Not me," said Mimi. "I'll be working on a big mutton chop by that time. That is, if I've guessed the menu right. It's listed as haunch of werewolf."

Her smile was somber.

They had finished their potage when the skeleton dance went on. Then, as Mimi's mutton chop was served, the shrouds parted and revealed an upright coffin standing in the center of the stage, flanked by heavy black curtains. Father Time strode on stage as master of ceremonies and at his invitation, a dapper Frenchman came from the audience to try out the coffin.

The man was ushered around behind the curtain at the left and from there he stepped in through an open side of the coffin, to face the audience. As the bearded emcee intoned about ashes, dust and the grave conquering all, the smiling Frenchman underwent a startling transformation under the glare of lights within the coffin. Gradually, his features became skull-like, his form turned to a skeleton from which his evening clothes hung in drifts of rags and shreds.

As the audience gasped, even Mimi forgot to eat her *cotelette de loup garou,* while she stared first at the coffin, then at Gerard and exclaimed: "Why, it's incredible. You've never carried anything like that with our show. Why not?"

"You can't travel it," explained Gerard. "The coffin front has a sheet of plate glass slanted across it. As lights flick off behind the glass, others come on as alternates in front, turning the glass into a mirror.

"To the right, behind that black curtain, is a duplicate of the coffin interior, containing the skeleton. That's what you're seeing right now. Keep watching, the lights are being switched back."

Gradually, the skeleton was becoming the living man again. As Mimi stared transfixed, Gerard

whispered softly: "There's a better show at the corner table reserved in my name. If the man there is doubling for me, I wonder who his girl friend is."

Mimi glared toward the corner where a man in tuxedo was barely visible in the gloom, as he leaned forward to chat with a girl in a pink lamé wrap, whose vivid red hair caught the dull light from the skull lamps and reflected it with the brilliance of polished copper. Gerard smiled and gestured to the mutton chop with its sprig of parsley and its paper frill.

"Finish that bit of wolf in sheep's clothing," said Gerard. "Something is due to happen, as part of the frame-up. When the excitement starts, spot whatever you can and break out of here fast."

Other patrons were going to the stage to take the skeleton test, but Gerard could tell from the persuasive way that the man at the table was gesturing toward the stage that the red-haired girl intended to follow. Gerard slipped Mimi a printed card that he had brought from the Hotel Stellaire.

"Check in there," he told Mimi. "I'll see that you get your luggage. Wait"—he tore a corner from the card—"if I send anybody, I'll have them bring this. Make sure it matches up."

"All right," agreed Mimi, "but don't switch corners. I've known that to happen!"

Another person was going through the coffin transformation as the red-head arose from the corner table and went up on the stage. Mimi gave a depreciating sniff. "If anything is a plant, she is. You can tell from the way she walks that she's a show girl, probably from some local night-spot. Anyone would know it—"

The audience, apparently, did know it. From the half-filled hall came applause and voices calling: "Mademoiselle Pompom!" Then, as the girl took a bow, Father Time helped her remove her lamé wrap. Beneath, she was attired in a costume that would have rated as scanty indeed, except that it was artfully augmented by a few dozen pompoms which bedecked the shapely girl from shoulders to ankles, with some provokingly placed at salient locations.

"Meet Mademoiselle Pompom," droned Father Time, "the living contrast to this chamber of horrors. But tonight, she, too, shall go the way of all flesh."

The girl shrugged a shoulder as though she did not care and a loosened pompom fell to the floor, where she pretended not to notice it. Another shrug, another pompom dropped, while Father Time continued: "Yes, she will enter the coffin and fade to a skeleton before your gaze."

"Why all the stall?" asked

Mimi. "Why doesn't she just shake off a few more powder puffs and creep into the crypt?"

"They are changing the skeleton," explained Gerard, "putting in one with pompoms and allowing for those that are due to drop. There she goes now."

The girl was stepping through the side curtain and the audience rocked with laughter as Father Time plucked a souvenir pompom from her hip. Gerard missed that bit, for he was watching the corner table, where a glint of light made a sudden sweep. No tableware could have produced that flash. The glitter came from the rising barrel of a machine-gun.

Gerard rose from his chair and sidled to a door that he was sure led back stage. Moments later, he had skirted the black curtain and was viewing Madame Pompom in the coffin. The murmur from the audience told him that the transformation from girl to skeleton had been consummated.

Gerard bounded forward, shot out his hand, caught the girl's wrist and wrenched her bodily from the coffin.

They were half way to the stage door when the girl broke loose and darted back toward the coffin, leaving a strew of pompoms behind her. Gerard overtook her and voiced the warning:

"Don't go back into that coffin unless you want to stay—for keeps!" Then, as Gerard profited by her hesitation and held her in a momentary clinch, the wisdom of his words was proven.

Out front, Father Time was gesturing to the reflected skeleton, hung with a few pompoms, that the audience thought occupied the coffin. He was droning, "Her stay in the haunt of the dead is over, now she shall return to the domain of the living and bloom anew!"

Mimi, remembering Gerard's admonition to watch everything, had just turned toward the deep corner of the cabaret. She, too, recognized the steel glint that Gerard had noted earlier.

At that instant, the machine-gun chattered, tonguing its flame straight toward the coffin on the stage. The audience shrieked as the crash of glass echoed from the upright casket. The skeleton vanished instantly, leaving only a lighted void, framed with jagged edges of glass.

The illusion was destroyed, but instead of a life being snuffed out with it, the man with the machine-gun—like the rest of the audience—was confronted with a new riddle:

What had become of Mademoiselle Pompom?

IV

One man could have answered that: The Great Gerard. At the

rattle of the machine-gun and the crackle of the glass, the redhead had gone limp in the magician's arms. He'd shaken her back to action, then rushed her out through the stage door, which opened on to one of the steep streets so common in the Montmartre. There, Gerard placed her in one of the inevitable Parisian taxicabs that was waiting to pick up the showbreak trade.

Gerard poured directions to the driver and they swung around by the front street, where customers were stumbling up from the Cabaret de la Mort. Among them, Gerard saw Mimi, but there was no need to snatch her from the terrified throng.

Mimi not only was losing herself nicely in the shuffle; she was spotting someone. So the cab kept on its way and Gerard turned his attention to Mademoiselle Pompom.

Over her fright, the girl's shivers were due solely to her scarcity of costume, so Gerard obligingly closed the cab windows to prevent the evening breeze from raising havoc with the last few pompoms. Whitestone introduced himself to the girl who stammered in surprise:

"You—you are the Great Gerard? But you can't be. He was the man I was talking with at the table."

"I suppose he told you that," said Gerard, "but from the way he acted later, you shouldn't trust anything he said."

The girl accepted that understatement with a nod that showed she trusted the real Gerard. Soon, she was pouring him her story. Her name was Georgette Bragance and she had played bit parts at the Moulin Rouge until she'd found an opening as Mademoiselle Pompom at a small night spot. There, the management of the Cabaret de la Mort had made her a proposition to spice their show by working as a stooge in the coffin number.

"I stopped by between my other shows," explained Georgette, "and if people recognized me, so much the better. Henri Durand said it would make me more popular."

"Henri Durand?" The name struck a note with Gerard. "You mean the theatrical writer with *La Monde du Nuit?*"

"Yes," replied Georgette. "I met him with Eugene Lebrun, the juggler, at the Cabaret de la Mort."

"Lebrun was working there?"

"He was helping them arrange tricks like the skeleton coffin and Durand was much interested. But it was Lebrun who promised to introduce me to you. I expected to find him in his cellar workshop this afternoon, but Durand was there instead. He said Lebrun had gone away, leaving his helper to finish the props."

"You saw the helper?"

"Only his back." Georgette doubled forward in the cab seat and made a hammering motion. "He was nailing up a big box, a long box"—she spread her arms —"long, like a coffin. It was heavy, too, when Durand and the helper took it upstairs and put it on a truck. The helper was still hunched, like this—"

"Did Durand go with him on the truck?"

"No, he left later in a cab. When I said that Lebrun had promised to introduce me to you, Durand said that was all arranged; that you had reserved a table where I was to meet you. I thought"—Georgette beamed a smile—"that after you saw me in the coffin, you would want me with your show."

"I still might." Gerard's eyes went quizzical. "Tell me, did Durand write the program for the Cabaret de la Mort?"

"Yes. I heard him talk about it with Lebrun."

"And that," said Gerard, "covers everything."

Georgette didn't begin to understand. She gave the magician a puzzled stare, only to have her wide eyes dazzled by glaring lights as the cab pulled up before the Gare de Lyon.

"You can't be taking me on a train!" exclaimed the girl. "Why, they wouldn't let me through the gate with so few clothes."

"You're staying right here," said Gerard. "As for clothes"—he gave Georgette an appraising survey, even including such details as foot-size— "I'll take care of that when I get back."

Soon, Gerard returned, bringing a pair of woman's suit cases which he handed in through the cab door.

"You'll find all you need in there," he said. "They belong to Mimi, my leading lady, and she's just your build. Take your pick while you're riding to the Hotel Stellaire, where you will find Mimi. Give her this and say you'll be hearing from me later."

Gerard passed Georgette the torn corner from the hotel card and she rewarded him with a gracious smile from the cab window. How that smile would take with Mimi, when the red-head showed up at the Stellaire in the blonde's own smart attire, Gerard did not try to guess. He had other things to think about.

From Georgette's testimony, it was obvious that Durand and an accomplice had murdered Lebrun in his workshop beneath the Cabaret de la Nuit and were about to truck away the body when the girl came along. Since Durand prepared the program, he could easily have stopped at the printer's and picked up an advance copy to plant with the body, to make it appear that the trail to the curio room had been followed many hours later.

That same accomplice, whose face Georgette had not seen, had

doubtless doubled back to the cabaret to pose as Gerard at the table reserved in the magician's name. The man, when Gerard had seen him reach for the machine-gun, had hunched himself much in the way Georgette had described Lebrun's helper.

A neat trick, indeed, to get rid of Georgette, who had learned too much, by falsely pinning her murder on Gerard, who would later be charged with Lebrun's death as well, with the planted program forming the perfect link between the cabaret and Pinetti's.

But it still didn't solve the riddle of Lebrun's body in the sealed room, even though Gerard, who knew a few tricks himself, had taken the teeth out of that mystery. Gerard's only policy now was to play it straight, at midnight, and see what developed from that time on.

At midnight, Gerard found the representatives of the Parisian press awaiting him at Pinetti's, twenty strong. As their story was to deal with the Great Gerard as a collector of magical curiosa and memorabilia, as well as a theatrical figure, the group included writers from off-trail publications, among them Henri Durand, of *La Monde du Nuit,* or Nightlife, as its English edition was termed.

Leon, the concierge, was back and had admitted the group to the front reception room. Now, with one exception, they were clamoring to see the curio collection. The exception was Durand, a man of medium build and dapper, rounded face, with just enough twist to his pointed mustache to give it the illusion of a smile that never appeared on the lips beneath.

Gerard remembered Durand from previous meetings as a pusher, always mugging the spotlight. The fact that he was out of character, staying in the background, fitted with his part as instigator of a double murder plot that had only half succeeded. But to pin down Durand as the brain of a subversive Commie group that had done away with Lebrun, was a problem in its own right.

Had Mimi been present, she would have admired the bland way Gerard delivered his spiel about Pinetti, the ease with which he opened the letter lock and finally, his dramatic firing of the pistol shot that lighted the hundred candles. Then, in the midst of a theatrical bow to his audience of journalists, Gerard seemingly caught the reflected horror from their staring, frozen faces.

The magician turned; did a double-take at sight of Lebrun's sword-pierced body. He swung toward the newsmen again, just as the face of Henri Durand pushed forward from the chalk-

white group. In an accusing tone, Durand voiced the words that Gerard expected: "This is a case for the police!"

Within a quarter hour, a squad of French detectives were going through Pinetti's preserves with a painful thoroughness. They questioned both Gerard and Leon, even searching the concierge's quarters on the floor below, finding nothing but old furniture and a room stacked with empty boxes.

They studied the front reception room where the newsmen had been congregated when Gerard arrived; then, observing how the smooth carpet ran intact beneath the steel-backed double doors, they concentrated on the curio room itself.

Carefully, they removed Lebrun's body from the floor, drawing out the sword point which Gerard had purposely left in place. One detective found the program from the Cabaret de la Mort and said, "Ah!" as he handed it to a deputy inspector, who nodded wisely and repeated: "Ah!"

From then on, the investigation moved.

The deputy inspector, who introduced himself as Pierre Viviani, produced some thin-paper report sheets and checked them against last minute bulletins supplied by a detective.

"This evening," said Viviani, in a casual tone, "there was an affray at the Cabaret de la Mort. We find that you made a reservation there this afternoon, Monsieur Gerard."

"That would have been difficult even for a magician," said Gerard. "I was on the train coming in from Marseille."

"Someone phoned later, confirming the reservation."

"People have a way of misusing my name for publicity purposes, Inspector. I wouldn't put it past the Cabaret de la Mort. Apparently no one has even heard of the place."

"May I see that program?" requested Durand. He studied it intently for a moment, then added: "Why, it's tonight's! Whoever brought it here, Inspector, must have been at the Cabaret de la Mort, about the time of the trouble there."

"And how," demanded Viviani sharply, "would you know so much about it?"

"Because I have prepared these programs and they are never delivered until show time. Sometimes they are late even then. Someone must have come here directly after the shooting at the cabaret, perhaps bringing Lebrun's body with him!"

Viviani's thin eyebrows arched an inquiry. Durand promptly explained: "You see, Inspector, Lebrun worked at the Cabaret de la Mort, building their illusions. Perhaps it was he who reserved a table in the name of Gerard."

The inspector pondered; then nodded. "Lebrun was mixed in many things," Viviani declared, "so many, that there is reason to suspect anyone who was closely associated with him." He turned to Gerard. "You for one, m'sieu."

"But all I did," said Gerard, "was buy this collection and place my own lock on the door."

From the corner of his eye, Gerard saw an irrepressible twitch of triumph at the tips of Durand's mustache. But it wasn't Durand who supplied the interruption; it was Viviani.

"But tonight"—the inspector crinkled the report sheets—"an attempt was made upon the life of a girl named Georgette Bragance. She vanished from a cabinet at the Cabaret de la Mort, when a man fired a machine-gun at her from the table reserved in your name, M'sieu Gerard!"

"When I make girls disappear," said Gerard, "I use a revolver with blanks, not a machine-gun loaded with real bullets. What is more, I work my illusions on my own stage, not someone else's. I must admit I specialize in table magic too, but not the sort you have just described."

Durand chose that moment to insert the comment that Gerard was sure would soon be due.

"About this room, M'sieu Gerard," suggested Durand, blandly, "you have just confirmed the fact that you alone could unlock its one door. Am I correct?"

Gerard nodded and Durand's dead pan saddened as the journalist turned to Viviani. "Perhaps, *M'sieu l'Inspecteur,*" he said, "you should go over this room inch by inch and make sure there is no other means of entry. Then you will know whether Gerard brought the body here."

Viviani ordered the inspection. Durand's secret triumph grew while the detectives tapped the walls and ceiling of the curio room. Next, they were examining the steel barrier that blocked off the front room, only to find it as solid as it looked.

Finally, they turned to the casement windows, which they had taken for granted must be properly latched and bolted. It was Gerard's turn to worry now, for fear they would overlook his preparations, something he could hardly call to their attention. But the meticulous way of these Parisian investigators proved the deciding factor.

Under one detective's pressure, a casement began inching open. Another man was quick to spot the jimmy marks. Those came under microscopic inspection; bulbs flashed as closeup photos were taken.

From the way the glow faded from Durand's features, Gerard recognized that he was chiding himself for having overlooked those windows, never suspecting

that Gerard, himself, had nullified the sealed room trap.

Detectives took more pictures, then went out into the back yard to study the windows from the outside. They came across the ladder in the yard next door, and when they questioned Leon, the concierge decided that he must have left it outside, the last time he locked up the house.

Burglary had become the obvious answer. Perhaps, as one detective put it, Lebrun had decided to steal back some of his magical collection, only to quarrel with some crook who had been aiding him. But Deputy Inspector Viviani was not impressed by what he termed a "far-fetched theory" and Gerard could understand why.

Most certainly, Viviani must know that Lebrun had been a secret investigator for the French government and that subversive plotters were responsible for his death. How Georgette and others figured, was a riddle which one man could answer, if only in part. That man was Gerard Whitestone.

Curiously, as matters now stood, the Great Gerard was still more baffled than anyone, regarding how Lebrun could have entered the tight-locked curio room, dead or alive.

He had no intention, however, of letting anyone suspect that he was puzzled, least of all the police of Paris.

V

Gerard was still fumbling for an answer when Viviani invited him to headquarters, something which he could not very well refuse.

There, Gerard learned the hard way that he was still Suspect Number One. He was questioned until after dawn, in the office of Inspector Raoul Beaumont, at the Surete headquarters in the Rue des Saussaies.

The inspector was a patient, gray-haired man who sat behind a desk with his long chin resting on his interlaced fingers as he listened, eyes closed, to the story that Gerard had repeated for the twentieth time.

"Your story sounds very good, M'sieu," Beaumont declared, "particularly as the medical examiner reports that Lebrun must have been dead as early as five o'clock, which is before your train arrived in Paris. We have checked with Marseille and have learned that you were there in the morning.

"But suppose" — Beaumont eyed Gerard above a report sheet—"suppose you had taken a plane instead of the train. You would have had time to look up Lebrun, murder him and leave that body in the room, before you supposedly reached Paris—unless someone can prove you were on that train.

Gerard saw his dilemma. He

couldn't very well nominate Mimi to support his alibi. The blonde might let something slip regarding their early visit to Pinetti's.

Gerard tried another tack. "But your own detectives found the window jimmied."

Inspector Beaumont opened his droopy eyes and handed Gerard a photo which showed a closeup of the window.

"A very good job," complimented Beaumont, "except that it required your cooperation. That window never could have been jimmied had it been tightly clamped."

Gerard shrugged as though regretting an oversight.

"You would have known if that window happened to be loose," said Beaumont. "You or an accomplice who helped bring the body there."

"Bring it there!" said Gerard. "I thought Lebrun was killed on the premises by his own card sword!" He picked up a photo of the room, pointed to an empty spot above a row of framed playbills. "Look—that's where the sword always hung."

"Reports show that Lebrun was suffocated," said Beaumont. "The blood from the sword wound did not flow profusely. Since you know nothing of how he died"—there was an ironic touch to the inspector's tone—"perhaps you can tell me *why* he died."

"Whoever killed him," said Gerard slowly, "may have been after some secret documents that Lebrun once kept in that room."

"They were after a code," agreed Beaumont. "We have samples of Lebrun's correspondence when he worked for the Underground. Enemies of France have such correspondence, too, and would like to crack it to learn the names of other secret agents who are serving us still, against subversive factions. But it is practically impossible."

From a desk drawer, Beaumont brought a sheet of paper studded with rows of numbers. The top line ran: 8-22, 19-9, 46-53, 12-4, 102-7.

"A book code," the inspector said. "8-22 would mean the twenty-second word on the eighth page, and so on. But unless one has the book, he cannot crack the code." He beamed as he put his first direct question: "You don't have the book, do you?"

"Not unless it's in the curio room," said Gerard. "There are a lot of old manuscripts filed there."

"You have a list of them?"

Gerard shook his head. He brought a little packet of color photo slides from his pocket, held one to the light.

"Lebrun carried hundreds of these," explained Gerard. "Photos of the apparatus and the playbills in his curio room—a collection in themselves. In fact,

he sold sets of these pictures. He said he'd had them made in case his collection was destroyed in the war.

"The rumor got around that Lebrun had already sold his collection and carried the photos, hoping to find some dupe who would buy the originals and never get them. But when I met his price, he gave me the key to the room before I paid him anything. I went there and personally checked the playbills and apparatus by the photos Lebrun had already given me."

Beaumont arched his eyebrows quickly. "Those manuscripts you mentioned? Where did they figure?"

"As a bonus. I've been through them and I might be able to tell if any have been stolen. But the fact that I have no list of them probably adds to my guilt."

Beaumont nodded emphatically. "It does," he said.

"If I were really guilty," snapped Gerard, "I'd never have come to Pinetti's house at midnight. That's the trouble with your French law. You frame a man right from the start, by considering him guilty unless he can prove himself innocent. Now in America—"

The inspector was on his feet, furious, eyes blazing, his fist pounding the desk as his voice drowned Gerard's.

"In America!" stormed Beaumont. *"Pouf!* You follow the barbarous practice of calling a man innocent until proven guilty. So your police throw that innocent man into prison where he can never vindicate himself. Then they go out to find all the evidence against him, ignoring whatever might prove his innocence!

"If he claims he saw a bushy-haired man commit a murder for which he has been blamed, do they look for such a man? You do not. They throw out the dragnet as they call it and who do they bring in? Every bald-headed crook in the city! And when they fail to find evidence against the man"—Beaumont gave his arms a sweeping, hopeless gesture—"what do they do? They reduce the charge so he will plead guilty although he is innocent.

"But here in France, it is different! If we call a man already guilty, what else is there to prove? Only his innocence! So that is what the police try to do! When the accused man can help us, *ah!*"—he studied Gerard narrowly—"why should we not let him help? If he runs away, it will only prove what we already think, that he is guilty. Here"—Beaumont began stacking report sheets and photos—"take these. They may help!"

"You mean"—Gerard was incredulous—"I am free?"

"Absolument. Besides" — a

twinkle showed beneath Beaumont's half-drooped lids—"we could not hope to keep you here. Knowing Houdini's secrets as you do, you would break out of our eighty-year-old cells as easily as he once did. You are guilty, so go!"

The inspector followed Gerard to the door and gestured for a guard to let the magician pass. Blandly, Beaumont added: "Besides, you may lead us to the accomplice who figured in Lebrun's death. At least, we should hear from you by tonight."

VI

An hour or so later, after Gerard had crossed the Seine four times and switched in and out of three halfway disguises, Gerard pulled into the Hotel Stellaire and breakfasted with Mimi, his accomplice in innocence, and Georgette, the lone material witness in the strange case of Eugene Lebrun.

They ate in the little suite which the two girls shared and apparently the tense situation had smothered any rivalry between blonde and redhead. Mimi, for one, gave an eager report.

"I followed the machine-gunner last night. I spotted the cab he took and I trailed it in another, to a place called the Sahara Cafe."

"You know it?" Gerard asked Georgette. *"La Sahara?"*

"A very cosmopolitan place," nodded Georgette. "You find Algerians mixing with provincials—and American tourists."

"That's what they took me for," beamed Mimi, "a tourist. They never suspected I'd come from the Cabaret de la Mort. In no time, I found out who he was. They call him *Rodolph de la Detente."*

"The Trigger," translated Gerard. "Do you know him, Georgette?"

"I have heard of him. I would recognize the man who was at the table in the cabaret. I was close enough to see his face and he didn't expect me to live to remember it."

She spoke with assurance.

Gerard nodded; then summed things as they stood.

"The police know a lot more than they say," he said, "but there is still more they would like to know. We've got to link Durand with Rodolph and the only way is to bait the hook." He turned to Mimi. "Give me that batch of letters we were going to answer after we reached Paris."

Mimi produced the letters. From them, Gerard drew one that listed odd items stored in a Parisian warehouse.

"Left-overs from the Lebrun collection," said Gerard, "that were never shipped to the Pinetti house. I'm calling a press conference for one o'clock, Mimi,

so meet me at the Gare de Lyon at three."

"And what," put in Georgette, "shall I do?"

"Stay right here,' said Gerard, "and keep out of sight. We will need you for the big pay-off."

It was half past one before Gerard had finally assembled a very feeble quota of Parisian journalists in a little restaurant just off the Avenue des Champs Elysees.

Henri Durand was spokesman for the group, as Gerard expected he would be. Suave, debonair as usual, Durand was the first to congratulate Gerard on clearing himself with the police.

"I had very little difficulty," said Gerard. "They decided it was a burglary and they released me.

"But the program from the Cabaret de la Mort?"

"Must have been delivered early for once. Lebrun probably went to his workshop during the evening and picked one up when he left. When he reached the curio room, he walked in on the burglars."

"You mean he had the combination to your letter lock?"

"Of course. I gave it to him, so he could send me items when I was on the road. But he'd never have told anyone, not even if they'd tried to torture the combination out of him."

Momentarily, the suave mask slipped from Durand's face. Gerard guessed that Durand—with Rodolph's aid—must have forced Lebrun to reveal his secret way into the curio room, instead of the letter combination which Lebrun never had known.

"I hardly knew Lebrun," cried Durand. "I regarded him as a magical technician, rather than a historian, which would have interested me much more."

"It would have?" Gerard's face lighted as though in recognition of a fellow-enthusiast. "Then you have heard of the celebrated French *prestiditateur,* Robert-Houdin—"

"Of course." Durand turned to the few reporters and swelled in the manner of a quasi-authority. "Houdin was the great Parisian magician of a century ago. He had his own theater here.

"And you also know," prompted Gerard, "that Houdini took his name from Houdin."

"Certainly." Durand gave his fingers an impetuous snap. "I am trying to recall now, the exact circumstance—"

"Like every great magician," put in Gerard, "Houdin wanted a successor, so he chose a capable young magician and gave him the name Houdini, meaning like Houdin."

"That was it," said Durand, "and of course, as you all know" —he was turning to the group— "Houdini became so world fa-

mous that most people have forgotten Houdin."

Gerard's lips flickered with a smile that he covered by spreading out his warehouse list. He had caught Durand's weakness, the man's way of trading on other people's ignorance to assert his own self-importance. Now, Gerard was ready to play on Durand's own lack of knowledge. Laying the list on the table, the magician pointed out an item.

"This will interest you, Durand. The famous writing desk of Robert-Houdin. Of course you realize its historic value."

Gerard paused, letting Durand begin a nod; then, in time with it, Gerard continued: "It is the desk on which Houdin signed the agreement naming Houdini his successor and handed it to him in person, at Saint Gervais, near Blois."

Durand's nods continued; his eyes had an eager gleam.

"In it," said Gerard, "Robert-Houdin kept his unpublished memoirs, more valuable than the desk itself. Today, I shall have it brought to the Pinetti house and placed in the front reception room, manuscript and all."

"This desk," queried Durand. "Lebrun prized it greatly?"

"Very greatly," said Gerard. "He often went to the warehouse to look at it. This desk originally belonged to Houdin's friend and patron, the Count de l'Escapolier. You have heard of him?"

Durand gave a shrug and a smile: "Who has not?" he said. "That is, among those who know their magical history."

"Tomorrow morning, then," Gerard told the group, "you may meet me at the Pinetti house to hear the full story of Lebrun's collection, including the famous writing desk."

Gerard phoned the warehouse, arranged for the delivery of the desk. He met Mimi at the Gare de Lyon, to give any Surete spotters the impression that she had just arrived in Paris. Gerard and the blonde went directly to the Pinetti house and entered the curio room.

The windows had been locked by the police and Gerard still was the only man who had the combination to the letter lock. But when Gerard compared photos given him by Beaumont with his present view of the room itself, he noticed points of difference.

"These were taken just before the room was closed," Gerard told Mimi. "But the screen has been moved, there is a drawer part way open in the corner file. Somebody has been in here since last night?"

"But who?" queried Mimi. "And how?"

"Who?" Durand," said Gerard. "How? That's what we must

find out. It may answer the whole mystery."

Meticulously, Gerard went through the file, time and again, but with no result until, as the sinking sun was glinting through the big locked window, he paused among papers under the letter "H."

"Durand had Houdini on his mind," said Gerard, "and though his ignorance of historical facts is stupendous, he may be informed on technical matters—the very point he was trying to cover up. Houdini's secrets"—Gerard was going through a file of them, in alphabetical arrangement—"they're all here, through to Vanishing Elephant. Wait though: V—W—"

Gerard paused and gestured to the file: "It's gone, the last secret of the lot. Durand had to come and take it, for fear we'd find it and guess the answer."

"But what secret," queried Mimi, "begins with the letter W?"

"Walking Through a Wall," said Gerard. "The famous stunt Houdini did at the New York Hippodrome in the early Twenties. They used to build a brick wall on the stage edge, toward the audience, so Houdini could work the act."

Gerard turned, pointed dramatically to the front of the curio room, with its glistening sheet of stainless steel.

"Lebrun knew Houdini's trick of walking through a brick wall," Gerard said, "so all he had to do was apply it to the steel wall that he installed here! If I'm right, we can soon find out. Come along."

Gerard led the puzzled blonde from the curio room, spun the letter lock and conducted Mimi downstairs to the storeroom stacked with empty boxes, directly beneath the arched doorway with steel wall. Among the boxes, Gerard found a hidden switch and pressed it.

Silently, a trap door opened downward in two sections from the ceiling. Through the opening, Mimi saw the under surface of the thick carpeting that covered the floor of the upstairs rooms.

"That's the trick of walking through a wall," said Gerard. "They'd put a screen on each side of the wall and Houdini would go behind one screen and come out from the other. Nobody thought of a trap door, because the stage was carpeted, right underneath the wall itself.

"But when the trap dropped open, he could wiggle under the wall, because the rug sagged from the weight of his body. Afterward"—Gerard pressed the switch and the wide trap closed—"when the trap came up in place it pressed the rug smooth again and nothing could be detected. Lebrun rigged his curio room for the same trick, so he

could enter or leave it by way of the front reception room, without anyone knowing it!"

"And Durand must have learned the secret."

"Right. Either by trailing Lebrun, winning his confidence, or forcing him to talk." Gerard halted, tilted his head to listen. "Here comes the truck from the warehouse," he said. "I'd better get upstairs."

As a final touch, Gerard pressed the switch, dropping the trap door again. "Leave it open," he told Mimi, "I may need it. But if I use it, shut it fast!" He pressed a stubby revolver into Mimi's hand. "And you may need this, in case somebody shows up down here—like Durand's pal, Rodolph."

VII

Upstairs, Gerard met the truckers at the front door and superintended the unloading of several crates, which were left in the front hallway. Only one was opened at Gerard's order. It contained the famous writing desk, an ornamental, well-decorated piece of furniture which rated as a fine antique, regardless of its historical significance.

It was placed in a front corner of the reception room and Gerard was already trying a key in the desk lid when the truckers left. One man, pausing in the hallway, was fishing in a pocket of his coveralls for a match to light his pipe, when the front door closed behind the others.

Instantly, the trucker unmasked. He flung off his wide-visored work cap, and lurched forward, shoving a gun that he had pulled from his pocket. The muzzle met Gerard's eyes as he turned and above it, he saw the broad face of Henri Durand, beaming in triumph.

"I shall unlock that desk," said Durand, gesturing Gerard back with the gun. "Perhaps this Houdin manuscript is the very thing I seek."

Gerard's stare was puzzled. "You mean for cracking Lebrun's code?"

"You think ahead of me," purred Durand, "but not far enough ahead." His finger wavered on the trigger. Then he added almost savagely, "At least I must let you live until I have checked the manuscript. I may still need you." He shrugged. "Who knows?"

With that, Durand turned the key and lifted the desk lid. From within, a gun roared and Durand reeled backward with a howl, letting his own revolver fly from his other hand. His wrist was bleeding and instinctively, he found himself clutching it, but the wound had not come from the gun inside the desk.

A pointed lever, long, sharp like a cat's claw, had delivered a deep scratch to Durand's wrist.

Gerard, equally quick, had timed a swoop of his own, following that of the mechanism. Hardly had Durand recovered from his surprise, before he saw Gerard picking up the revolver from the floor. Toying with the gun, the magician idled its muzzle straight toward Durand.

Then, suavely, Gerard was telling the disconcerted crook how badly he had slipped.

"I spoke of Houdin picking Houdini as his successor," said Gerard, "just to learn if your ignorance of magical history was as colossal as I suspected it might be. I really expected you to take it as a joke, Durand. But when I saw that you accepted the statement seriously, your game was as good as up."

There was perplexity in Durand's glare. Though he still clutched his wrist, he'd forgotten the wound and was anxious to hear Gerard's explanation. The magician obliged.

"For your elucidation," Gerard told Durand, "Houdin died three years before Houdini was born, so they never could have even met. What was more, the name was never given to Houdini. He simply appropriated it, like everything else he ever wanted, and he was roundly denounced by Houdin's descendants.

"I baited you with that talk about Houdin's unpublished memoirs, too. The autobiography of Robert-Houdin is one of the classics of magical literature, that has appeared in dozens of editions. I even tested you when I mentioned the Count de l'Escapolier, the original owner of this writing desk. Everyone acquainted with magical lore knows of this desk, Durand."

Durand's ugly eyes became more puzzled than before.

"Houdin fixed this desk for the Count," continued Gerard, "with a blank pistol actuating a cat's claw, to trap a thief among the Count's retinue of servants. That was more than a hundred years ago and the desk has been preserved as a museum piece ever since. When I saw it on Lebrun's list, Durand, I decided to try it out on you the same way, provided your ignorance proved sufficient to make you eligible."

Gerard's eyes grew hard. "I've a pretty good idea what you were searching for, Durand, when you killed Lebrun. You knew that among his papers were records of your subversive activities—records which would have proved utterly damning to you personally—and to your fellow conspirators. Not just witnessed statements, I'm quite sure. It can be taken for granted that it was not evidence collected second hand, but microfilms and sealed instructions bearing your signature. You knew you had to recover them, or face execution as a traitor to France.

"Some of the material would be in code, and you may have wanted Lebrun's secret code for another reason—to translate documents which Lebrun collected during and immediately after the war, and which may have since passed into the hands of your fellow conspirators."

While he spoke, Gerard was studying Durand as he would a member of an audience during the performance of a specially delicate sleight or illusion. From those eyes, Gerard caught a sudden glint, as vocal as a snake's rattle. But not for an instant did Gerard follow the new direction of Durand's gaze.

"And now," said Gerard, "we can both tell our full stories at the Surete—"

Instead of finishing his sentence, Gerard made a quick wheel away from the hallway door, toward which Durand's eyes had sparked a signal. A hunched man was launching himself into a long lunge, thrusting an Apache knife ahead of him, with Gerard as the target.

It was Rodolph and instead of trying to aim the gun at the fellow, Gerard simply gave it a back-hand fling squarely into the man's face. Rodolph dropped, then came up snarling with the knife, while Durand, bounding from beside the writing desk, reclaimed his gun. Both were blocking Gerard from the hallway, but he did not hesitate.

Already, the magician was diving for the portieres at the rear of the room. He hit the floor on his side, rolled against the bolted doors and was instantly swallowed from sight by the thick tufts of the sagging rug. Then, Gerard had twisted himself beneath the steel wall and was gone, safely on the other side, as Durand's shots began to singe the rug tufts.

Rodolph sprang for the archway hoping to squirm beneath the steel wall and follow Gerard. But the hunched man's shoulder hit solid flooring.

Mimi, down below, had played the perfect assistant as she always did. She had seen the rug sag, then ease as Gerard's weight left it. Without an instant's hesitation, Mimi had pressed the switch that closed the smooth, swift-acting trap.

Gerard could not use the regular door to leave the curio room as it was locked on the outside, by the letter lock. Instead, he loosened a window, scrambled out to the balcony and dropped to the yard below. In by the back way, he reached the room beneath the trap door, grabbed the revolver from Mimi and started out to meet Gerard and Rodolph.

When he reached the stairway, Gerard smiled, pocketed his gun and bowed. He was face to face with Inspector Beaumont.

"I assume," said Gerard, "that some of the reporters who left

the press conference informed you regarding the desk that was to be delivered here?"

"They did," said Beaumont, "exactly as you presumed they would and I moved in with a squad—as you expected—rather than disappoint you."

At the top of the stairs, Gerard saw Beaumont's men, half a dozen of them, marching Durand and Rodolph out to the Parisian equivalent of a paddy wagon. No felicitations were exchanged. Gerard merely matched Durand's glare with a restrained smile. It was Beaumont who bowed when he said to Gerard:

"You must pardon me, M'sieu, but I am needed at the Surete to question two men regarding the death of Eugene Lebrun."

The next morning, Gerard arrived at Beaumont's office bringing Mimi and Georgette to supply their respective testimony. Beaumont nodded when he heard their stories.

"Both Durand and Rodolph have told us all they know," Beaumont stated. "They murdered Lebrun, but failed to find his code. Durand fell for your game perfectly. He thought the non-existent Houdin manuscript would contain the key to Lebrun's code and he revealed his hand in his effort to get it."

Beaumont paused, flourished a sheaf of Lebrun's coded correspondence. "What we need now," he said, "is the one thing Durand still does not know. Where is Lebrun's code? Show me a book that might be the right one and I can test it!"

For answer, Gerard placed a square wooden box upon the table. From within, he drew color photo slides, depicting Lebrun's playbills. All were numbered for reference to the originals.

"There is the code," said Gerard. "Playbills instead of book pages. Lebrun left sets of slides with people during the war and some must have been members of Durand's ring of Soviet Intelligence Agents, not just magical collectors."

Eagerly, Beaumont began looking at the slides, as he asked: "How did you hit on this?"

"Simply enough," said Gerard. "Lebrun would have attracted suspicion carrying a set of slides around Paris, where he had the originals to show people. But that was why he needed a secret entrance to the collection room, so he could go in and out, no matter who owned the place, when he had a message to decode."

"You are right," said Beaumont, as he studied a slide in the light. "Anyone could have borrowed a key from the concierge, copied it and entered Pinetti's house. But the secret room was another matter! A veritable fortress, except for the steel wall that

anyone could walk through, except that no one guessed how—until you came along, Gerard. Ah!"

The exclamation told that Beaumont had found a code-word on one of the numbered slides. He began trying others, holding them to the sunlight that streamed through the window. That was Gerald's awaited cue.

"Come," Whitestone told Mimi and Georgette, as he bowed them to the door. "The inspector is very busy and it is a fine day out, full of sunshine and fleecy clouds. After all"—Gerard's smile dismissed such minor things as murder—"there is no place like Paris in the Spring!"

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the missing diamond

by . . . Hugh Wiley

To James Lee a diamond could imprison in its glowing depths a world of beauty—or the most hateful of crime's dark enigmas.

At six o'clock in the evening one of James Lee's assistants rang through from Los Angeles with a progress report on a narcotic case involving men and methods important enough to have interested the Department of Jusice.

At six-fifteen James Lee's chief rang through to San Francisco with some new dope on a couple of big-shot public enemies who were supposed to be heading for San Francisco. Seven minutes after James Lee had finished talking with his chief, Mr. Joseph Temple called him on the telephone.

"I should like to see you for half an hour," Mr. Temple said. "Can you have dinner with me at my house? I have a new consignment of emeralds that might interest you!"

"The emeralds sound tempting," James Lee said. "I'm working tonight. Are you downtown?"

"I'm in my office," Temple told him.

"Why don't you drop in on your way home?"

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Published originally as A RAY OF LIGHT

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes. I am bringing Meade Capron with me. Not socially—he's part of the plot."

"Bring him along."

When he had hung up the telephone James Lee walked from the living-room of his apartment to his kitchen. "Light up the library," he said to his house boy. "Two gentlemen will be here in a few minutes."

"Cocktails?" the servant asked.

Before James Lee could reply his cook added another question to the house boy's interrogation. "Two men stay for dinner?"

James Lee shook his head at the cook. "No," he said, and then to the young servant, "No cocktails. It's Mr. Joe Temple. He likes our dry sherry. Take in a decanter of it. Old Meade Capron is with him. I don't know what Mr. Capron drinks."

"Olo man Caplon likee whiskey," the Chinese cook announced. "Long time I savvy he likee."

James Lee smiled. "Take some bourbon in for Mr. Capron," he said to the house boy.

Fifteen minutes later to the dot Temple arrived. "I'm awfully glad to see you," he declared, gripping James Lee's hand and smiling cordially. "I've got a tough problem for you. Capron will tell you all about it. Mr. Lee—Mr. Capron."

To the elderly Mr. Capron Temple explained: "I believe I told you that Lee and I were classmates at Yale. If any man can find a way out of this mess, he can."

In the library of James Lee's apartment Temple got down to cases immediately. "First of all," he said, "I've got a very serious charge to lay against young Warren Bayne. Do you know him?"

"I've met him," James Lee replied. "I can't say that I know him. You mean, of course, the young man who is to marry Miss Harwood—Louise Harwood?"

"That's the man. He's a giddy young fool on the social trapeze, to put it mildly."

Lee nodded. "Given to making long swings on the social trapeze from Hollywood to Del Monte to Burlingame to San Francisco, from what I've heard."

"And all way points where the polo set do their heavy drinking," Temple added.

"What's he done?" James Lee asked.

"He's done a lot of things in the past," Meade Capron suggested. "I knew his father. You can't blame the boy."

"Blame him for what?"

There was a moment's silence. Then Temple said: "You know that we have some exceptional diamonds in the shop. And a diamond from Temple and Peck —is sound advertising copy. Bayne bought a stone from us a month ago for sixteen thousand dollars. It was a square dia-

mond, and we mounted it in platinum.

"He gave it to Louise Harwood for an engagement ring. Peck tried to sell him a smaller stone but nothing would satisfy love's young dream except that sixteen-thousand-dollar piece. He paid us two thousand dollars in cash. Peck gave him a two-year credit on the balance. That partner of mine is a fool. I'll let Meade Capron tell you the rest of the story."

The elderly Mr. Capron bathed his tonsils in a generous libation of thirty-year-old bourbon, coughed once and took the spotlight. "It happens, Mr. Lee, that I am not unfamiliar with gem stones. Mr. Temple will tell you—"

"Capron knows emeralds," Joseph Temple interrupted. "He knows as much about emeralds as any man in the country. He knows enough about diamonds for our present purposes."

Old Meade Capron frowned for a moment at the limitations set upon the compliment and then he said: "I saw the square diamond the day after young Bayne gave it to Louise Harwood. I had seen it several times before. It is a distinguished stone.

"I saw Miss Harwood again yesterday evening at her mother's house. She was wearing the ring, but the square diamond had been replaced. Paste! The imitation would pass well enough with the average observer—under electric lights. I kept my counsel. You and Mr. Temple know of my discovery, but no one else does."

"Didn't you speak of the substitution to Miss Harwood?"

Capron shook his head. "For obvious reasons I did not. I went so far as to suggest that the ring's romantic associations must have persuaded her to wear it day and night." At this point old Meade Capron gave forceful expression to his opinion of the younger generation.

"She assured me that its romantic value meant nothing to her. She confessed that she laid it aside with her other jewelry every night. More important—she told me that she had entrusted the stone to young Warren Bayne for two days. The ring was slightly large for her finger. She and Bayne and a dozen other wild young people had gone to Hollywood on a party with some movie people whom they met at Del Monte. She is—"

"Is Miss Harwood addicted to wild parties?" James Lee interrupted.

Old Meade Capron fortified his spirit with another shot of bourbon before he permitted himself to answer. "She is the wildest girl in her set."

"That's not the point," Joseph Temple said. The jeweller, sticking close to his indictment of Warren Bayne, seemed determined to let the case against

Louise Harwood rest in his eagerness to present the evidence against the young man.

"Actually we're not much interested in the girl," he said. "She's a wild young fool but Bayne is a wild young crook. He's a flashy ne'er-do-well. He never did a day's work in his life—unless you'd call polo work. He's notoriously a heavy gambler and notoriously a loser. He has no income. He's always broke. He's been in trouble over his bank account a hundred times. He's marrying Louise Harwood for her money."

"Her mother's money," Meade Capron interposed.

"Her mother's money," Joseph Temple conceded. "And now, needing cash, he virtually steals a diamond from the girl he's engaged to marry!"

James Lee's eyes narrowed. "That's a fairly strong statement."

"I admit it. It can't be strong enough to—"

"You've left out the important fact," Meade Capron interposed. "Tell Mr. Lee about Warren Bayne's bank account."

Joseph Temple nodded violently. "The bank account! That's the whole story!" he exploded. "I was leading up to it. Listen to this! The day after Warren Bayne returned from the Hollywood orgy and got sobered up he deposited six thousand dollars in the West National. Was it a check? It was not! Was it a draft to his order? It was not! The money was in cash!" In his rage Joseph Temple glared at James Lee. "Obviously he got it from some pawnbroker, or some fence in payment for my diamond!"

"How did you learn about the six thousand?" James Lee asked.

"Confidential information from the cashier of the West National," Temple told him. "He's a friend of mine."

James Lee waited for a moment and then said, "Clearly your next move is to swear out a warrant for the young man. What do you want me to do—unofficially? The Department of Justice isn't interested in such things."

"Swear out a warrant!" Joseph Temple scowled in helpless rage. "Do you know what that means? We don't swear out warrants for the damned polo set. It would cost me fifty important customers the day the news was published."

"I still fail to see where I draw any cards in this game." Lee said, frowning at Joseph Temple. "What do you want me to do?"

"The case is clear enough against young Bayne. As long as you're professionally associated with crime and criminals you can settle this affair without any publicity. Get hold of Bayne and tell him for me that if he pays over the six thousand that he has in the West National I will let

the balance ride for a while. You can suggest that if he doesn't turn the six thousand over to us we will serve him with a warrant."

James Lee thought a moment, then said, "It's thin material to high-jack a man with. What else have you got on young Bayne? We need something more definite than your suspicions."

With rising temper, Temple exploded, "He's a scoundrel, I tell you! He's absolutely notorious for his drunken parties. You can scare him with that mess he got into at Braga's gambling joint after the Stanford game. Louise Harwood and a dozen of her friends were in the party. If Braga's bartender had died it would have been manslaughter."

Lee shook his head. "That's a little bit vague. Everybody gets into messes after football games. Help yourself to the sherry and cool off."

Under the soothing influence of his third glass of sherry, Temple became more conciliatory. "You'd better come home to dinner with me." he said. "We can talk this out."

"Thank you, not this evening," James Lee said. "I'll stay here and do a little quiet thinking."

Mr. Temple brightened. "You mean you'll at least work on this diamond job?"

James Lee nodded. "Yes," he promised. "Please don't do anything . . . violent, until you hear from me."

When his visitors had left, James Lee walked to the kitchen of his apartment. Facing his Chinese cook, he asked: "Do you know the servants in Mrs. Rockewell Harwood's house?"

"Missy Harwood cook long time my friend," the servant replied. "He my cousin."

James Lee nodded. "Mrs. Harwood's daughter has a big diamond ring," he said. "She is to marry young Mr. Warren Bayne. He gave her the ring."

"I know him. Very wild boy, fight like soldier."

James Lee nodded again, in full agreement with his cook's opinion of Warren Bayne. "I want to see Miss Harwood's diamond. Ask your cousin to get hold of the ring. Tell him to bring it down here tonight."

"Mebbe no can do."

"Maybe *can* do," James Lee said. "Try it."

"If can do he ketchum."

After he had enjoyed his dinner James Lee smoked a cigarette leisurely in the quiet of his library. When the cigarette was finished he put a call through the Chinatown Exchange, cackling a demand in Cantonese for a number that did not answer until central had rung three times.

To the reluctant "Hola" of a thin voice that answered him James Lee demanded, "Put Chin Yut on the line."

"Chin Yut long time go way," the thin voice said.

James Lee identified himself and added sternly: "Put Chin Yut on the line."

"Chin Yut is speaking," was the instant reply.

"Come to my house at once."

"I come now." A click ended the evidence of Chin Yut's bending will.

Facing Chin Yut with only a curt, preliminary nod of greeting, James Lee asked, "You are acquainted with the gambling house run by Braga Covilla?"

For an instant a grimace of amusement distorted Chin Yut's cadaverous countenance. "Who is not?" he asked.

"He is still a customer of yours?" James Lee demanded.

When Chin Yut hesitated with his reply James Lee grew impatient. "I have the records of Braga's purchases, complete," he said.

A mask of rage replaced the smile on Chin Yut's face. "I must kill a man or two in my employ," he said.

"You have some good men in your employ. Answer me! Braga still buys opium from you?"

Chin Yut nodded his head. "You know that he does," he said sullenly.

"How many smoking-rooms has he in his gambling house?"

"He has three rooms."

"For white men?"

"For white men and white women," Chin Yut answered. "He serves no others."

"That's all," James Lee said. "Chin Yut, your feet are on the pathway to hell."

"That is evidently a secret known to the world. Good luck, long life."

"Sons to mourn at your grave," James Lee said, following the *Ritual of Right Conduct.* "Good night."

When Chin Yut had left his apartment, James Lee summoned his house boy. "Mrs. Harwood's cook will probably come to see me tonight," he said. "Admit him instantly. I am going to sleep now. But I want you to stay awake."

The genius of the kitchen in the Harwood home rang the bell of James Lee's apartment two hours after midnight.

The house boy ushered him into the library of the apartment. "My master will welcome you in one moment," he said.

When he had greeted his visitor, James Lee inquired, "The daughter of your house is—careless with her treasures?"

In answer the Harwood cook hauled a knotted silk handkerchief out of the depths of an inner pocket of his coat. "This is the ring," he said.

When he removed the silk covering from the ring James Lee observed the stone for a moment, flooding it with the strong green-

ish light of one of the reading lamps in the library. He turned to his house boy.

"Serve our guest with whatever refreshments he may desire," he ordered, and then to the Harwood cook, "If you will excuse me I will return in a few moments."

In a long inside room of his apartment which had been fitted up as a laboratory James Lee devoted ten minutes to an accurately-checked measurement of the refractive index of the stone in Louise Harwood's ring. Presently, averaging the six readings which he had made confirming old Meade Capron's opinion of the stone, he exclaimed in satisfaction to himself, "Stress, one, point nine seven five."

For a moment following his measurement of the refractive index of the false gem he considered making a test for its specific gravity. Then he changed his mind. *Difficult—and nothing much to be gained by it,* was the way he phrased it in his mind. *We win or lose on one, point nine seven five.*

He returned to his library, where his guest awaited him. He handed the ring to Mrs. Harwood's cook. "You have served me well," he said. "Let me know when I may express my gratitude more effectively. A cup of wine? . . . Plenteous years."

Choking slightly over the bourbon which he had selected in preference to the sherry on the library table the cook rejoined with: "Seven sons at thy grave."

"And silence."

The cook bowed to James Lee. "A wise man understands a nod."

When his visitor had gone James Lee went to bed without delay. "I shall want nothing more tonight," he said to his house boy who stood waiting in his master's bedroom. "Breakfast at seven. I have a busy day planned for tomorrow. Call me at six-thirty."

Of the six facet-cutting machines in San Francisco two belonged to private owners and four to lapidaries who did commercial work. It was two o'clock in the afternoon before James Lee finished his interview with the man who operated the fourth of these commercial machines.

Returning to his apartment he telephoned a brief message to Louise Harwood. "I should like to have you call at my apartment at four o'clock," he said. "This is James Lee, Department of Justice, speaking."

After a moment, the girl faltered, "I will come."

"At four o'clock?"

"At four o'clock."

When he had given Louise Harwood his address James Lee hung up the telephone.

To his house boy a moment later James Lee said, "A lady

will call here to see me at four o'clock. I will receive her in the library. In the meantime go down to the Twin Pigeon Jewelry Store, present my compliments to Moy Sam and tell him that I have need of his services this afternoon. Ask him to be here at four o'clock. Entertain him in your room until I summon him."

Promptly at the appointed hour, impelled by a growing fear of the threat that she had read into James Lee's invitation, Louise Harwood rang the bell of Lee's apartment.

He greeted the frightened girl with an ingratiating smile. "First of all, let me assure you that you will not regret this visit," he said. "You are unhappy now. On my word of honor you will leave here presently with your heart lightened of its burden—and with your Braga problem solved. The opium—"

"I did not smoke any opium."

James Lee lifted his hand. "I know that," he said. "I also know the names of your three companions who did—three young ladies. They were prompted by the mystery and the novelty of the thing, no doubt. But one of them is by way of becoming an addict now."

The look of surprise on Louise Harwood's face was replaced by horror. "Do you mean that she—"

James Lee pressed her hand. "Don't be alarmed. She has will enough to save herself."

After a moment of silence, he added, "I should like to have you come into my laboratory for a little while."

From an open box that stood on a table against the west wall of his laboratory James Lee lifted out a handful of glittering crystals. "Here is a beautiful piece of amethyst," he said, holding a purple crystal to the light. "And some rose quartz. And these are emeralds. Beautiful enough, but of no value . . . This is a piece of glass.

"Do you remember from your school days how these things are identified—their relative hardness, their specific gravity, their varying abilities to bend a ray of light? This beautiful substance is glass. Do you see how its prisms break up the light into the spectrum colors? What a pure blue! Have you ever seen a ray of sunlight after it has been passed through a prism?"

"We had a lot of those things in school," Louise Harwood said. "I didn't pay much attention to them."

James Lee smiled. "A ray of sunshine is not very interesting when one is—in school." Slowly he turned the prismatic piece of glass in his hand until one of its facets glowed with a brilliant orange light.

"This is a very beautiful gem," he said. "It's worth a dollar of

any debased currency. I will show you how we determine its refractive index . . . See, I fix it in this prismatic section of the stone, and illuminate it with this pencil of light. Reading direct . . . and we read on the scale one, point nine seven five. That is the refractive index of the glass.

"It is, by the way, the heaviest flint glass that I have ever seen. Here is a crystal of quartz. It is much harder than glass but its refractive index is considerably less than the glass we have just tested. Do you find that this pastime bores you?"

The girl smiled a thin smile. "It is all very interesting," she said languidly.

"It will become more interesting perhaps," James Lee suggested. From a closed drawer to his right he removed another complex, glittering crystal. "Here is another substance—pure carbon. The glass was principally silica and potash and lead. The refractive index of this carbon crystal is much higher than the glass. You see it reads around two, point four two—a little less perhaps. This stone is called a diamond.

"The origin of the word is lost in antiquity. The Arabs and the Greeks and Romans referred to diamonds as 'adamas'—unconquerable. This is a very beautiful stone, by the way. Strangely enough it seems to be a replica of the stone you are wearing. May I see your ring a moment?"

Louise Harwood held her hand out toward James Lee. "I can't get it off my finger. The ring is too small."

"Perhaps if we moistened your finger with a drop of gylcerin . . . There. Now it comes off. Now let us fix it in this machine and— That's surprising, isn't it? The glass in your ring has the same refractive index as the lead glass we examined a few moments ago. What a coincidence. One, point nine seven five. It is really a first-rate imitation of a diamond. I suppose you leave your real jewels in the safe-deposit vaults?"

"It's the safest way," the girl faltered inanely.

James Lee nodded in quick agreement. "Quite. But isn't it strange that the difference in value between this diamond here in front of you and that piece of glass in your ring should be fifteen or twenty thousand dollars? Certainly the price of a diamond is no index of its beauty. But wouldn't you rather have this real diamond than a piece of glass? It's a marvelous gem."

Without waiting for the girl to reply James Lee called abruptly to his house boy: "Please tell Moy Sam to come in here a moment."

When the Chinese jeweler stood before him, James Lee handed him Louise Harwood's ring. "Take that piece of glass

out of the ring," he directed, "and substitute the diamond in place of it. You will find that the setting fits the diamond."

Lee turned to the girl quickly and held out an open cigarette case. "Have a cigarette," he said. "Enjoy the rich blessing of tobacco while Moy Sam does his work. He is very skillful. See there, how perfectly the diamond fits your ring?"

Three minutes later when Louise Harwood had returned the ring to her finger and when they were again alone James Lee suggested, "You may cry now for sixty seconds."

Presently, after the girl had devoted a good three minutes to her tears, James Lee picked up the glass crystal that Moy Sam had removed from the ring.

"Strangely enough," he said, "Braga Covilla gave the order for the manufacture of that imitation of your diamond. I found the man who cut this piece of glass—and he named his customer. I pried the story and the diamond out of Braga on the strength of what I know about his opium business. Let me wrap that glass gem up for you. Take it with you for good luck."

James Lee reached for a blue slip of paper that lay in the drawer of his work table. He held it toward Louise Harwood.

"You have seen this before?" he said. "It is the check that you gave to Braga the afternoon you entertained so lavishly—and lost so heavily at roulette. Here, I will wrap your glass gem in it. That will make your souvenir of this visit to my house complete."

Now for twice sixty seconds the girls voice came through incoherent sobs. When she was quieter she whispered, in gratitude, "I did not know—the penalty—for forgery—until Braga spoke of the penitentiary. He threatened me. I gave him the diamond. Overdrafts were nothing. I always got money from Mother. I'd lost a lot of money at roulette and I had taken too many cocktails."

"Not a very good defense when a blackmailer is after you," James Lee said. "May I offer you a glass of sherry? . . Let us sink this whole affair out of memory. Braga will keep his mouth shut, and I forget easily and completely." To his conscience, he added: "Once more I have compounded a felony!"

James Lee lifted his glass of wine toward Louise Harwood. "I wish you a happy wedding and a happy honeymoon with Mr. Warren Bayne."

Through her quiet tears the girl murmured, "You have made it possible for life to be happy for me. I cannot express by gratitude, Mr. Lee—and oh, I'll never forget how darned wonderful you've been."

(*Please turn to page* 141)

a case for colonel march

by . . . Carter Dickson

It's one thing to go over a room of mystery with a fine-tooth comb. Quite another to possess Colonel March's genius for observation.

JUST BEFORE closing-time on a Tuesday afternoon in December, a dark limousine drew up before the St. James' office of the City and Provincial Bank, and four men got out. Lights were burning inside the bank, but the day was raw and murky. Two of the newcomers went to the counter, where they accosted the cashiers with pistol-muzzles cradled over their arms. The third, who wore no hat or coat, walked behind the counter; and, before anybody knew what he was doing, began quietly drawing the blinds on the windows.

The fourth, who had taken a forty-five calibre revolver out of his overcoat pocket, spoke with great clearness.

"You know why we're here," he said. "Just keep quiet and nothing will happen to you."

One of the clerks, a youngster, laughed; and was instantly shot through the chest with a silenced gun.

The noise it made was no louder than that of slapping two cupped palms together, a kind

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Carter Dickson—indubitably one of the "top six" in the hierarchy of mystery story titans on both sides of the Atlantic—has created no less than six world-famous sleuths. But the amazing Colonel March, with his mottled face, stubby pipe and alert blue eyes has the unique distinction of being almost accepted by Scotland Yard itself as one of its brightest adornments. March, you see, presides over a department dealing with strange complaints and stranger people, and that means—a yarn such as this to delight and enthrall you.

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of *thock*. The clerk tumbled sideways, rattling against a scales, and they heard his body strike the floor. Then all noise seemed to die away under the bright, hard lights, except the sound of the newcomers' footsteps on the marble floor.

"That's right," said the man who had first spoken. "Just keep quiet and nothing will happen to you."

The thing was incredible; but it was happening. Possibly every man in the bank, now staring in various twisted positions with hands in the air, had seen it happen in a film, and had smiled at it as being confined to another continent. But with great precision the man who had drawn the blinds was now clearing out the safe, transferring what he wanted to a neat leather suitcase.

Outside bustled the traffic of St. James'. Passers-by saw a closed bank, and thought nothing of it. By the third minute it had become unbearable. The manager, risking it, ducked under the counter for a gun, and was shot down. Then the leader of the gang leaned close to a young clerk named John Parrish, and said:

"Thanks, kid. You'll get your cut."

Like four well-trained ghosts, the tight-lipped men came together and melted out into the street. Their car was away from the curb before the alarm sounded . . .

Now the robbery of the City and Provincial Bank failed because of one small but important fact. In England you can rob quite easily. You can even, if you do not mind risking execution, rob with violence. But you cannot make a getaway afterwards.

"Skipper" Morgan, late of Cicero, Illinois, might be excused for not realizing this. But Pudge Henderson, "Slugger" Dean and Bill Stein, all of whom knew Dartmoor as the rest of us know our own homes, should have realized it. Possibly they expected the very daring of the raid to bring it off for them, and they changed cars three times before, early that evening, two Flying Squad cars cut them off on the road to Southampton.

Skipper Morgan wanted to shoot it out, and was brought down in a flying tackle which broke his arm. But here the police met a snag: of twenty-three thousand pounds in cash and bonds, not one penny was found on the fugitives.

Chief Inspector Ames visited Skipper Morgan that night.

"You're in an unenviable position, Skipper," he said pleasantly. "One of those fellows you shot is likely to die. Even if he pulls through, you can count on a good long stretch."

The other said nothing, though he looked murderous. It

was Ames who had broken his arm.

"I don't say it would help you," pursued the chief inspector, "if you told us what you did with that money. But it might, Skipper. It just *might*. And you might tell us whether that young clerk at the bank, the one you said would get his cut, was in it with you."

"Dirty little rat," said the Skipper, out of pure spite and malice. "Sure he was in it. But I want to see my lawyer. That's all I want."

So they detained John Parrish. To Marjorie Dawson he wrote: "Don't you believe a word of it. Cheer up."

A solicitor for Morgan was speedily produced. This was none other than Mr. Ireton Bowlder, that aloof gentleman with the aristocratic nose and the wide clientele. Scotland Yard regarded him with disfavor, because he never failed to put their backs up. True, there was little that even Mr. Ireton Bowlder could do for the prisoners. But he contrived to suggest, with a fishy smile and a sad shake of the head, that they would leave the court without a stain on their characters. Still the stolen money was not forthcoming.

"It's one of two things, sir." Chief Inspector Ames told the Assistant Commissioner. "They've hidden it or they've turned it over to a fence."

"A fence for stolen money?"

"And bonds," said Ames. "Nothing easier. Of course we've got the numbers of the notes, fivers and above. But they can easily be disposed of abroad. At the present rate of exchange people are buying and hoarding English money, and they don't necessarily inquire where it comes from. I know of two fences like that, and I hear there's a third operating who's the biggest in the business."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Getting rid of 'hot' money used to be difficult—but it's simple now. It's more than a new kind of racket. It's a new kind of big business. The state of Europe being what it is, thousands of people are trying to get out of there and into England without their authorities knowing they've got any money at all. Hoarding English money is the best way to do it. If we could get a line on who's doing this—"

"Any suspicions?"

"Yes, sir," answered Ames promptly. "Ireton Bowlder."

The Assistant Commissioner whistled. "If it only could be!" he said, with dreamy relish. "Lord, if it only could be! But be careful, Ames. He's got a lot of influence. And what makes you think it's Bowlder, anyway?"

"It's all underground so far," Ames admitted. "But that's what the boys say. Now, we arrested Morgan and his mob just out-

side a village called Crawleigh. Bowlder's got a country house only a mile from there. Bowlder was at his country house on Tuesday night, though as a rule he only goes down at weekends. Skipper Morgan was down there twice in the week before the robbery. It doesn't prove anything. But taken with the rest of the rumors—"

"What about the boy Parrish?"

Ames grinned. "He had nothing to do with it, sir. It was Morgan's temper, that's all—or Morgan's idea of a joke. I'm convinced of it, and so is the bank. But Parrish might be useful."

Just how useful Chief Inspector Ames did not realize until the following day, when Miss Marjorie Dawson came hurrying up to town.

She was a quiet, fair-haired girl, pretty yet unobtrusive, though she was now strung up to fighting pitch. Her hazel eyes had a directness of gaze which was as good as a handclasp and she had, even in this difficulty, a sense of humor. She told the chief inspector things which made him swear. But, after a half-hour interview, it was not to the Assistant Commissioner that Ames took her. He took her to a door on the ground floor labeled *D3: Colonel March.*

"Colonel March," he said, "let me introduce Miss Marjorie Dawson. Miss Dawson is engaged to be married to young Parrish. She's now employed as a secretary to Ireton Bowlder's aunt—"

"Not any longer," said the girl, smiling faintly. "Miss Bowlder gave me notice yesterday."

"And she says Bowlder's got the City and Provincial Bank money."

Colonel March was a large, amiable man, with a speckled face, a bland eye, and a large-bowled pipe projecting from under a cropped moustache. He rocked on his heels before the fire, and seemed puzzled.

"I am delighted to hear it," he said formally. "But why come to me? This, Miss Dawson, is the Queer Complaints Department. Business has been bad lately; and I should be very glad to tackle the problem of a blue pig or a ghost in the garden. But, if you've landed Ireton, why come to me?"

"Because it's a queer complaint, right enough," said Ames grimly. "What Miss Dawson tells us is impossible."

"Impossible?"

Marjorie Dawson looked from one to the other of them, and drew a deep breath of relief. Color had come back into her face.

"I hope you're being frank with me," she said. She appealed to Colonel March. "Inspector Ames tells me that you haven't really got a case against John

Parrish, and don't intend to hold him—"

"No, no. You can have him whenever you want him," said Ames with impatience.

"But I came up here after somebody's blood," the girl admitted. "You see, the local police wouldn't believe me. But it's true, every word of it."

"The money vanished in front of their eyes," said Ames.

"One moment," said Colonel March, with an air of refreshed interest. He pushed out chairs for them. "Disappearing money. That, young lady, is distinctly better. Tell me about it."

"It was at Greenacres," said the girl, so eager to tell the story that they had to guide her to the chair. "Greenacres is Mr. Bowlder's country house. As Mr. Ames told you, I'm Miss Bowlder's secretary. She keeps house for her nephew."

"I'm not going to tell you what I felt when I heard about the robbery. The first I knew of it was when I opened the newspaper at the breakfast-table on Wednesday and saw John's name staring up at me—as though he'd committed a murder or something. I couldn't believe it. I knew it was a mistake of some kind. But I thought Mr. Bowlder might know—"

"Might know?" prompted Colonel March.

She hesitated, her forehead puckered. "Well, not that, exactly. I thought he might be able to help me, being a solicitor. Or at least that he would know what to do.

"It was barely half-past eight in the morning. I was the only one up in the house, except servants. Miss Bowlder, you see, doesn't get down until nine. Then I remembered that Mr. Bowlder had come down to Greenacres the afternoon before. I could go to him straight away.

"That's how it happened. You see, when Mr. Bowlder is at Greenacres he always has nine-o'clock breakfast with his aunt. He's very dutiful and all that. Any letters that come for him in the morning are always put in his study, which is at the back of the house. Before he goes in to breakfast, he always goes to the study to see if there are any letters. So back I went to the study, to catch him alone before he went to breakfast. I didn't knock. I just opened the door and walked in. And I got such a shock that I thought I must be seeing things.

"The study is a large, rather bare room, with two windows looking out over the terrace. It has recently been painted, by the way, which is rather important. It was a bright, cold, quiet morning, and the sun was pouring in. There is a bust of somebody or other on the mantelpiece, and a big flat-top desk in the center of the room. Of course, I hadn't

expected to find anybody there. But Mr. Bowlder was sitting at the table, fully dressed. And spread out in rows on the table were at least twenty packets of banknotes of all denominations. Nearly every packet was fastened with a little paper band with *City and Provincial Bank* printed on it.

"I simply stood and stared. My head was full of the City and Provincial Bank. And, anyway, it's not his own bank.

"Then Mr. Bowlder turned round and saw me. The sun was behind his head and I didn't get a good view of his face. But all of a sudden his fingers crisped up as though he were going to scratch with them. Then he got up and ran at me. I jumped outside. He slammed the door, and bolted it on the inside."

She paused.

"Go on, Miss Dawson," said Colonel March in a curious voice.

"It takes a long time to tell," she went on rather blankly, "but in a second or two I put together a whole lot of things. Skipper Morgan's gang had been arrested just outside our village; the paper said so. Morgan's picture was in the paper, and I knew I had seen him at Greenacres the week before. John had been down there to visit me, too. I suppose Morgan saw him there, and that's why Morgan made such very funny jokes about John when the bank was robbed. It was all a kind of whirl in my head. But it came together as a dead certainty.

"There's a telephone in the hall just outside Mr. Bowlder's study. I sat down and rang up the local police."

Here she looked at them with some defiance.

"What I was afraid of was that Mr. Bowlder would come out of the room and take the money away and hide it somewhere before the police arrived. I didn't see how I could stop him if he did. But he didn't even come out of the study. That worried me horribly, because the room was as quiet as a grave and I wondered what he might be up to. I like people to *do* something.

"Then I thought: 'Suppose he got out of a window?' But I remembered something about that. As I told you, the woodwork of that room had been painted only a few days before. It wasn't the best of painting jobs; and as a result both windows were so stuck that it was impossible to open them. Annie had been complaining about it the day before. In fact, they were to have been seen to that very day. So when the police arrived—I could hardly believe my good luck—Mr. Bowlder was still in that room with the money.

"It was an inspector and a sergeant of the local police. They were on hot bricks, because Mr.

Bowlder is an important man. But the Morgan gang had been caught near there and they weren't taking any chances. While I was trying to explain, Mr. Bowlder opened the door of the study. He was as pleasant and sad-faced as ever.

"He said: 'Money? What money?'

"I explained all over again, and I'm afraid I got a bit incoherent about it. But I told them the money was still in the study, because Mr. Bowlder hadn't left it.

"He said—and don't I remember it!—'Gentlemen, this young lady is suffering from optical illusions. At nine o'clock in the morning this is a pity. I am aware that you have no search-warrant, Inspector, but you are at liberty to make as thorough a search of this room as you like. How much money was there, Miss Dawson?'

"I said thousands and thousands of pounds but it sounded wrong even as I said it. Mr. Bowlder laughed.

"He said: 'Thousands and thousands of pounds, eh? Gentlemen, if you can find any money in this room—apart from a few shillings on my person—I will donate it all to police charities. But there is no money here.'

"And there wasn't. Enough money to fill a suitcase—and yet it wasn't there."

Colonel March frowned. "You mean the police didn't find it?"

"I mean it wasn't there to be found. It had just vanished."

"That's as true as gospel," declared Chief Inspector Ames with vehemence. "I rang them up half an hour ago and talked to Inspector Daniels. Search? They had the whole place to pieces! Bowlder sat and smoked cigarettes and egged them on. They even got an architect in to make certain there were no secret cavities anywhere in the room."

"And?"

"There weren't any. There wasn't a hiding-place for so much as a pound note, let alone a sackful of the stuff. The point is, what's to be done? I don't think Miss Dawson is lying. But all that money couldn't vanish into thin air. How could it?"

Colonel March was pleased. He relighted his pipe and rocked on his heels before the fire. Then, becoming conscious of the impropriety, he coughed and tried to conceal the fact that he was pleased.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "But this is the best thing I have encountered since Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin went after the purloined letter. Yes. Now let us see. We establish that there are no secret panels, cavities, or other flummery. Windows?"

"Just as Miss Dawson said. The windows were so stuck that two men couldn't move 'em.

Nothing could have been taken out of the room like that."

"Fireplace?"

"Bricked up. They don't use it, because the room is centrally heated. The bricks are solidly cemented and untouched. There's no possible hiding-place in or round the fireplace."

"How about the furniture?"

Ames consulted his notebook. "One flat-topped table, one small table, two easy-chairs, one straight chair, one bookcase, one lamp-standard, one standing ash-tray. You can take it for granted that not one of those got away without the closest examination. And nothing was hidden in any of them. Anything to add to that, Miss Dawson?"

Marjorie shook her head.

"No. And it wasn't in the carpet or the curtains, or behind the pictures, or in the leaves of the books, or even in the bust I mentioned—not that you could put all the money there, anyway. It just wasn't there." She clenched her hands. "But you do believe me, don't you?"

"Miss Dawson," said Ames slowly, "I don't know. You're certain Bowlder didn't leave the study at any time before the police arrived?"

"Yes — I'm positive."

"He couldn't have slipped out?"

"No. I was in front of the door all the time. It's true, Inspector. What reason would I have for lying to you? It has lost me my job, and it hasn't helped John. I've thought and thought about it. I thought of the trick, too, of hiding a thing by leaving it in plain sight, where nobody would notice it. But you certainly couldn't leave the City and Provincial Bank money in plain sight without anybody noticing it."

"Well, it beats me," admitted the chief inspector. "But then that's why we're here. It's impossible! Daniels swears there wasn't an inch of that room they didn't go over with a fine-tooth comb. And yet I believe you, because I've got a feeling Bowlder has been too smart for us somehow. Any ideas, Colonel?"

Colonel March sniffed at his pipe.

"I was just wondering," he muttered; and then a doubtful grin broke over his face. "I am still wondering. Look here. Miss Dawson. Are you sure there was *no* article of furniture in that room you haven't described to us?"

"If you mean things like ash-trays or desk-ornaments—"

"No, no. I mean quite a large article of furniture!"

"I'm certain there wasn't. There couldn't very well be a large article of furniture that nobody would see."

"I wonder," said Colonel March. "Is Mr. Bowlder still at Greenacres? Excellent! I very

much want to speak to him—and I want to see his study."

Under a sky heavy with threatening snow, the police car left Scotland Yard early in the afternoon. It contained Chief Inspector Ames and a plain-clothes man who was driving in the front seat, with Marjorie Dawson and Colonel March in the rear seat. To the girl's protest that she wished to remain in London with Parrish Colonel March turned a deaf ear, insisting that there was time enough. At four o'clock they drove into the grounds of an ugly but highly substantial and highly respectable country house in Victorian Gothic.

Colonel March stood up as the car stopped in the drive.

"Where," he asked, "are the windows of the study?"

"At the back," said Marjorie. "You take the path round to the left—"

"Let's take it," said Colonel March.

Dusk was coming on, but no lights showed at Greenacres. They circled the house under the blast of an east wind, Colonel March stumping ahead with his coat-collar turned up and an old tweed cap pulled low on his forehead. Climbing some flagged steps to a terrace, they looked into the nearer of the study windows; and came face to face with Mr. Ireton Bowlder looking out at them.

One of Bowlder's hands flattened out against the glass with white fingers. The other hand, which was wrapped in a handkerchief, he thrust into his pocket. In the twilight he looked nervous and a trifle greenish of countenance.

"Good afternoon," said Colonel March politely. The wind whipped the words away; and Bowlder inside the glass was as silent as a fish in an aquarium, though his lips moved. Then Bowlder raised the window.

"I said good afternoon," repeated Colonel March. Before Bowlder could move back he had reached out and shaken hands with him through the window. "You know most of us, I think."

"Yes," said Bowlder, looking at Marjorie. "What do you want?"

Colonel March leaned against the ledge of the window.

"I thought you would like to know," he said, "that the manager of the City and Provincial Bank was a little better this morning. This will probably make the charge against five persons something a little less than murder."

"Indeed. The fifth is young Parrish, I suppose?"

"No," said Colonel March. "The fifth is probably yourself."

Again wind whipped round the corner of the house, ruffling Bowlder's neat hair. But Bowlder himself was not ruffled. He regarded them with a pale and

skeptical smile; then he began to close the window.

"Better not," the colonel advised. "We're coming in."

"You have a warrant?"

"Oh, yes. That window, I see, is now in working order. Robinson"—he looked at the plain-clothes man—"will now climb through and stay with you while we go round by the front door."

By the time they reached the study, Bowlder had turned on a standard-lamp by the table, upon which it threw a bright light, though most of the room was left in shadow. The room was exactly as Marjorie Dawson had described.

"Now, then," said Bowlder quietly, "will you explain what you mean by this nonsense about a charge?"

"If," said Colonel March, "the City and Provincial money is found here, you're likely to be charged with Skipper Morgan. That is what I meant."

"Gentlemen—and Miss Dawson—listen to me. How many times have I got to submit to this? You don't really mean you want to make still another search?"

"Yes."

"Look round you," said Bowlder. "Take a long, careful look. Can you think of any place that could have been overlooked the the first time?"

Chief Inspector Ames had to admit to himself that he couldn't. But Colonel March, instead of searching for a secret in the room, lowered himself into an easy-chair by the table. Removing his cap and turning down the collar of his coat, he faced them with a kind of sleepy affability.

"In order to show you what I mean," he went on, "I must point out one of the curiously blind spots in the human mind. Has it ever occurred to you, Ames, that there's one piece of furniture in a room that nobody ever notices?"

"No, sir, it hasn't," said Ames, "You mean it's hidden?"

"On the contrary, I mean that it may be right there in front of everyone's eyes. But few people will ever see it."

"Are you trying to tell me," asked the chief inspector, "that there's such a thing as an *invisible* piece of furniture?"

"A mentally invisible piece of furniture," returned Colonel March. "Would you like proof of it? You have one in the sitting-room of your own apartment. I imagine there's one in the bedroom as well. It is under your eyes all the time. But suppose I said to you: 'Give me a list of every piece of furniture in your apartment.' You would then give me a list of things down to the smallest lampshade or ashtray. But I am willing to bet you would omit this whacking great object—"

Chief Inspector Ames looked

round rather wildly. But his eye fell on Mr. Ireton Bowlder, and he checked himself. Bowlder, who had been lighting a cigarette, dropped the match on the floor. Under the bright light of the lamp his forehead shone with sweat; and he was not smiling.

Ames stared at him.

"Whether or not I understand you," he said, "by heaven, that fellow does!"

"Yes. I thought he would," agreed Colonel March, and got to his feet. "That's where he has hidden the money, you see."

"Oh, what on earth are you talking about?" cried Marjorie Dawson. She could keep herself in hand no longer, and she almost screamed. "What could be invisible? What is there we can't see? What part of the room is it in? What's the size of it? What's the color of it, even?"

"As for size," replied the Colonel, "it may vary a good deal, but in this case it is about three feet high, two and a half feet long, and three or four inches deep. In color it is sometimes painted a bright gilt. But in this case the object is painted a modest brown."

"What?"

"I mean," said Colonel March, "a steam-radiator. Particularly a dummy radiator like that one in the corner over there."

Ireton Bowlder made a run for the door, but he was tripped and brought down by P.C. Robinson. They were compelled to use hand-cuffs when they took him away.

"THE possibilites for a dummy radiator, used for concealing something inside," said Colonel March, when they were on their way home, "deserves the attention of our best crooks. It is very nearly a perfect hiding-place. It is compact. It will hold a great deal of swag. And it is the one thing we never seem to notice, even if we happen to be looking straight at it.

"Nobody, you see, regards it as a piece of furniture at all—certainly not as a piece of furniture in which anything could possibly be concealed. Inspector Daniels never looked twice at the radiator in Bowlder's study, and it is difficult to blame him. The radiator gave out heat, like an honest radiator. It was made of iron, it seemed solid and it was clamped to the floor.

"You can buy one of them easily enough. They are really disguised oil-stoves—portable, with several concealed burners, one under each coil. I have never forgotten the shock I received, sitting comfortably by a steaming radiator in the house of a friend of mine, when it suddenly occurred to me that the house was not centrally heated.

"Bowlder's radiator, as you saw, was a more elaborate affair, but one that could be constructed

without difficulty. Two of the coils contained no burners, were invisibly hinged at the back, and formed a hollow receptacle as large as he could wish. The house was centrally heated, so that a mere radiator aroused no suspicion whatever. It was, in short, a private safe without lock or combination, but so commonplace as to defy suspicion. I have been waiting for somebody to try the trick, and just as I anticipated—somebody did."

"You mean you expected to find one of those things when we went down to Greenacres?"

"I am the Department of Queer Complaints," said Colonel March with apology, "and I was on the lookout for it as soon as central heating was reported in that room. I wasn't sure, of course, until we talked to Bowlder through the study window. The banknotes would get rather warm, you can understand, from being in a compartment next to the oil burner. They wouldn't scorch, any more than our clothes scorch when we place them on top of an ordinary radiator to dry. But they would be tolerably warm—and so would the fastenings when Bowlder opened his safe. That was why he had to wrap a handkerchief around his right hand. And it was Chief Inspector Ames with unerring intuition, who hit on the real clue long before it came to me."

"I did?" demanded Ames.

"Yes," said Colonel March. "You told me, with an accuracy beyond your wildest knowledge, that the money was hot."

THE MISSING DIAMOND (*Concluded from page* 129)

After Louise Hayward had left, James Lee promptly communicated with Joseph Temple on the telephone. "I've made a little progress," he reported.

"I knew you would!" Temple said, "Is that rascal going to turn over the money to us?"

"I'd go easy on the 'that rascal'—as you call him." James Lee advised. "The six thousand is his commission on the sale of a Monterey ranch that he induced one of his big-shot movie friends to buy. He's going to spend it all on his honeymoon trip. You'd better lay off the six thousand."

"What about the diamond?"

"Miss Harwood is wearing the diamond," James Lee announced.

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly sure. The lights in the Harwood house may have deceived Mr. Capron. You never can tell what a ray of light will do. Maybe any engagement ring looks phony to a man as old as Meade Capron."

the treasure of mr. reeder

by . . . Edgar Wallace

The criminal mind may harbor many darkly sinister illusions. But the astounding Mr. Reeder understood it from A to Izzard.

THERE IS a tradition in criminal circles that even the humblest of detective officers is a man of wealth and substance and that his secret hoard was secured by thieving, bribery, and blackmail.

It is the gossip of the fields, the quarries, the tailor's shop, the laundry, and the bakehouse of fifty county prisons and three convict establishments, that all highly-placed detectives have by nefarious means laid up for themselves sufficient earthly treasures to make work a hobby and their official pittance the most inconsiderable portion of their incomes.

Since Mr. J. G. Reeder had for more than twenty years dealt exclusively with bank robbers and forgers, who are the aristocrats and capitalists of the underworld, legend credited him with country houses and immense secret reserves. Not that he would have a great deal of money in the bank. It was admitted that he was too clever to risk discovery by the authorities. No, it was hidden somewhere and it was the pet dream of hundreds of un-

We've often wondered whether it was Edgar Wallace's youthful training as a Special Constable which gave him such an uncanny insight into crimes of violence which mystery lovers everywhere would almost certainly label: "Special" —or just his superb narrative gifts and his flair for the unexpected. Anyway, here is a Wallace saga of dark, unmitigated skullduggery in the old master's best vein, enhanced by a lively and very British concern for strict justice.

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lawful men that they would some day discover the hoard and live happily ever after.

The one satisfactory aspect of his affluence—they all agreed—was that, being on the aging side of fifty he couldn't take his money with him, for gold melts at a certain temperature and a gilt-edged stock is seldom printed on asbestos paper.

The Director of Public Prosecutions was lunching one Saturday at his club with a judge of the King's Bench—Saturday being one of the two days in the week when a judge dines lavishly. And the conversation drifted to a certain Mr. J. G. Reeder, the chief of the Director's sleuths.

"He's capable," the Director confessed reluctantly, "but I hate his hat. It's the one that astounding Grafton used to wear. I also loathe his somber attire. People who see him coming into the office think he's a coroner's officer. But he's capable, I'll concede. His side whiskers are an abomination, and I have a feeling that, if I talked rough to him, he would burst into tears. A gentle soul, beyond a doubt. Almost too gentle for my kind of work. He apologizes to the messenger every time he rings for him!"

The judge, who knew something about human nature, answered with a frosty smile. "He sounds rather like a potential murderer to me," he said cynically.

Here, in his extravagance, he did Mr. J. G. Reeder an injustice, for Mr. Reeder was quite incapable of breaking the law. At the same time there were many people who formed an altogether wrong conception of J. G.'s harmlessness as an individual. And one of these was a certain Lew Kohl, who mixed bank-note printing with elementary burglary.

Threatened men live long. A trite saying that—but like most things trite it was true in principle. In a score of cases, where Mr. J. G. Reeder had descended from the witness stand, he had met the baleful eye of the man in the dock and had listened with considerable interest to ominously disturbing promises as to what would happen to him in the near or remote future. For he was a great authority on forged bank-notes and he had sent many men to penal servitude.

Mr. Reeder, that inoffensive man, had seen prisoners almost literally foaming at the mouth in their rage, he had seen them white and livid. He had heard their envenomed execrations and he had met these same men after their release from prison and had found them amiable souls half ashamed and half amused at their nearly forgotten outbursts and immoderate threats.

But when Lew Kohl was sen-

tenced for ten years, he neither screamed his imprecations nor registered a vow to wring Mr. Reeder's neck. Lew just smiled and his eyes caught the detective's for the space of a second. The forger's eyes were pale blue and speculative, and they held neither hate nor fury. Instead, they said in so many words: "*At the first opportunity I will kill you.*"

Mr. Reeder read the message and sighed heavily, for he disliked fuss of all kinds, and resented, in so far as he could resent anything, the injustice of being made personally responsible for the performance of a public duty.

Many years had passed, and considerable changes had occurred in Mr. Reeder's fortune. He had transferred from the specialized occupation of detecting the makers of forged banknotes to the more general practice of the Public Prosecutor's bureau, but he never forgot Lew's smile.

The work in Whitehall was not heavy and it was very interesting. To Mr. Reeder came none of the anonymous letters which the Director received in shoals. In the main they were self-explanatory, and it required no particular intelligence to discover their motive. Jealousy, malice, plain mischief-making, and occasionally a sordid desire to benefit financially by the information which was conveyed, were behind the majority. But occasionally:

Sir James is going to marry his cousin, and it's not three months since his poor wife fell overboard from the Channel steamer crossing to Calais. There's something very fishy about this business. Miss Margaret doesn't like him, for she knows he's after her money. Why was I sent away to London that night? He doesn't like driving in the dark, either. It's strange that he wanted to drive that night when it was raining like blazes.

This particular letter was signed, "A Friend." Justice has many such friends.

"Sir James," was Sir James Tithermite, who had been a director of some new public department during the war and had received a baronetcy for his services.

"Look it up," said the Director when he saw the letter. "I seem to remember that Lady Tithermite was drowned at sea."

"On the nineteenth of December last year," said Mr. Reeder solemnly. "She and Sir James were going to Monte Carlo breaking their journey in Paris. Sir James, who has a house near Maidstone, drove to Dover, garaging the car at the Lord Wilson Hotel. The night was stormy and the ship had a rough crossing. They were halfway across when Sir James came to the purser and

said that he had missed his wife. Her baggage was in the cabin, her passport, rail ticket, and hat, but the lady was not found. Indeed she was never seen again.

The Director nodded.

"I see you've read up on the case."

"I remember it," said Mr. Reeder. "The case is a favorite speculation of mine. Unfortunately. I see evil in everything and I have often thought how easy it would be—but I fear that I take a warped view of life. It is a horrible handicap to possess a criminal mind."

The Director looked at him suspiciously. He was never quite sure whether Mr. Reeder was serious. At that moment his sobriety was beyond challenge.

"A discharged chauffeur wrote that letter, of course," he began.

"Thomas Dayford, of one seventy-nine Barrack Street, Maidstone," concluded Mr. Reeder. "He is at present in the employ of the Kent Motor-Bus Company, and has three children, two of whom are twins and quite appealing youngsters."

The Chief laughed helplessly.

"I take it that you *know!*" he said. "See what there is behind the letter. Sir James is a big fellow in Kent, a Justice of the Peace, and he has powerful political influences. There is nothing in this letter, of course. Go warily, Reeder. If any kick comes back to this office, it goes on to you—intensified!"

Reeder's idea of walking warily was peculiarly his own. He traveled down to Maidstone the next morning, and, finding a bus that passed the lodge gates of Elfreda Manor, he journeyed comfortably and economically, his umbrella between his knees. He passed through the lodge gates, up a long and winding avenue of poplars, and presently came within sight of the grey manor house.

In a deep chair on the lawn he saw a girl sitting, a book on her knees, and evidently she saw him, for she rose as he crossed the lawn and came toward him eagerly.

"I'm Miss Margaret Letherby. Are you from—?" She mentioned the name of a well-known firm of lawyers, and her face fell when Mr. Reeder regretfully disclaimed connection with those legal lights.

She was as pretty as a perfect complexion and a round, not too intellectual face could, in combination, make her.

"I thought—do you wish to see Sir James? He is in the library. If you ring, one of the maids will take you to him."

Had Mr. Reeder been the sort of man who could be puzzled by anything, he would have been puzzled by the suggestion that any girl with money of her own should marry a man much older

than herself against her own wishes. There was little mystery in the matter now. Miss Margaret would have married any strong-willed man who insisted.

"Even me," said Mr. Reeder to himself, with a certain melancholy pleasure.

There was no need to ring the bell. A tall, broad man in a golfing suit stood in the doorway. His fair hair was long and hung over his forehead in a thick flat strand; a heavy tawny moustache hid his mouth and swept down over a chin that was long and powerful.

"Well?" he asked aggressively.

"I'm from the Public Prosecutor's office," murmured Mr. Reeder. "I have had an anonymous letter." His pale eyes did not leave the face of the other man.

"Come in," said Sir James gruffly.

As he closed the door he glanced quickly first to the girl and then to the poplar avenue.

"I'm expecting a fool of a lawyer," he said, as he flung open the door of what was evidently the library.

His voice was steady. Not by a flicker of an eyelash had he betrayed the slightest degree of anxiety when Reeder told him his mission.

"Well—what about this anonymous letter? You don't take much notice of them as a rule, do you?"

Mr. Reeder deposited his umbrella and hat on a chair before he took a document from his pocket and handed it to the baronet, who frowned as he read. Was it Mr. Reeder's vivid imagination, or did the hard light in the eyes of Sir James soften as he read?

"This is a cock-and-bull story of somebody having seen my wife's jewelry on sale in Paris," he said. "There is nothing in it. I can account for every one of my poor wife's trinkets. I brought back the jewel case after that awful night. I don't recognize the handwriting. Tell me, who is the lying scoundrel who wrote this?"

He tapped the letter angrily.

Mr. Reeder had never been called a lying scoundrel, but he accepted the experience with admirable meekness.

"I thought it untrue," he said, shaking his head. "I followed the details of the case very thoroughly. You left here in the afternoon—"

"At night," said the other brusquely. He was not inclined to discuss the matter, but Mr. Reeder's appealing look was irresistible. "It is only eighty minutes run to Dover. We got to the pier at eleven o'clock, about the same time as the boat train, and we went on board at once. I got my cabin key from the purser and put her ladyship and her baggage inside."

"Her ladyship was a good sailor?"

"Yes, a very good sailor. She was remarkably well that night. I left her in the cabin dozing, and went for a stroll on the deck—"

"Raining very heavily and a strong sea running," nodded Reeder, as though in agreement with something the other man had said.

"Yes. I'm a pretty good sailor myself. Anyway, that story about my poor wife's jewels is utter nonsense. You can tell the Director that with my compliments."

He opened the door for his visitor, and Mr. Reeder was some time replacing the letter and gathering his belongings.

"You have a beautiful place here, Sir James—a lovely place. An extensive estate?"

"Three thousand acres." This time he did not attempt to disguise his impatience. "Good afternoon."

Mr. Reeder went slowly down the drive, his remarkable memory at work.

He missed the bus, which he could easily have caught, and pursued an apparently aimless way along the winding road which marched with the boundaries of the baronet's property. A walk of a quarter of a mile brought him to a lane shooting off at right angles from the main road, and marking, he guessed, the southern boundary.

At the corner stood an old stone lodge, on the inside of a forbidding iron gate. The lodge was in a pitiable state of neglect and disrepair. Tiles had been dislodged from the roof, the windows were grimy or broken, and the little garden was overrun with docks and thistles. Beyond the gate was a narrow, weed-covered drive that trailed out of sight into a distant plantation.

Hearing the clang of a letter-box closing, he turned to see a postman mounting his bicycle.

"What place is this?" asked Mr. Reeder, arresting the postman's departure.

"South Lodge—Sir James Tithermite's property. It's never used now. Hasn't been used for years—I don't know why. It's a short cut if they happen to be coming this way."

Mr. Reeder walked with him toward the village, and he was a skillful pumper of wells, however dry; and the postman was not dry by any means.

"Yes, poor lady! She was very frail—one of those sort of invalids that last out many a healthy man."

Mr. Reeder put a question at random and scored most unexpectedly.

"Yes, her ladyship was a bad sailor. I know because every time she went abroad she used to get a bottle of that stuff people take

for seasickness. I've delivered many a bottle till Raikes, the chemist, stocked it. 'Pickers' Travellers' Friend,' it was called. Mr. Raikes was only saying to me the other day that he still had a few bottles on hand, and he didn't know what to do with them. Nobody in Climbury ever goes to sea."

Mr. Reeder went on to the village and idled away his precious time in most unlikely places. At the chemist's, at the blacksmith shop, at the modest building yard. He caught the last bus back to Maidstone, and by great good luck the last train to London.

And, in his vague way, he answered the Director's query the next day with: "Yes, I saw Sir James. He's a very interesting man."

This was on the Friday. All day Saturday he was busy. Sunday brought him a new interest.

On this bright sunday morning, Mr. Reeder, attired in a flowered dressing-gown, his feet encased in black-velvet slippers, stood at the window of his house in Brockley Road and surveyed the deserted thoroughfare. The bell of a local church, which was accounted high, had rung for early Mass, and there was nothing living in sight except a black cat that lay asleep in a patch of sunlight on the top step of the house opposite. The hour was 7:30 and Mr. Redder had been at his desk since six, working by artificial light, as it was quite late in October.

From the half-moon of the window bay he regarded a section of the Lewisham High Road and as much of Tanners Hill as can be seen before it dips past the railway bridge into sheer Deptford.

Returning to his table, he opened a carton of the cheapest cigarettes, and, lighting one, puffed in an amateurish fashion. He smoked cigarettes rather like a woman who detests them but feels that it is the correct thing to do.

"Dear me," said Mr. Reeder feebly.

He was back at the window, and he had seen a man turn out of Lewisham High Road. He had crossed the road and was coming straight to Daffodil House—which frolicsome name appeared on the doorposts of Mr. Reeder's residence. A tall, straight man, with a sombre brown face, he came to the front gate, passed through and beyond the watcher's range of vision.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Reeder for the second time, as he heard the tinkle of a bell.

A few minutes later his housekeeper tapped on the door.

"Will you see Mr. Kohl, sir?" she asked.

Mr. J. G. Reeder nodded.

Lew Kohl walked into the room to find a middle-aged man in a flamboyant dressing-gown

sitting at his desk, a pair of pince-nez set crookedly on his nose.

"Good-morning, Kohl," Mr. Reeder said.

Lew Kohl looked at the man who had sent him to seven and a half years of hell, and the corners of his lips curled.

" 'Morning, Mr. Reeder." His eyes flashed across the almost bare surface of the writing-desk on which Reeder's hands were lightly clasped. "You didn't expect to see me, I guess?"

"Not so early," said Reeder in his hushed voice. "But I should have remembered that early rising is one of the good habits which are inculcated by penal servitude."

He said this in the manner of one bestowing praise for good conduct.

"I suppose you've got a pretty good idea of why I have come, eh? I'm a bad forgetter, Reeder, and a man in Dartmoor has time to think."

The older man lifted his sandy eyebrows, and the steel-rimmed glasses on his nose slipped further askew.

"That phrase seems familiar," he said, and the eyebrows lowered in a frown. "Now let me think—it was in a melodrama, of course, but the name of the play escapes me."

He appeared genuinely anxious for assistance in solving the problem.

"This is going to be a different kind of play," said the long-faced Lew through his teeth. "I'm going to get you, Reeder. You can go along and tell your boss, the Public Prosecutor. But I'll get you, never fear. There will be no evidence to hang me. And I'll get that nice little stocking of yours, too, Reeder!"

The legend of Reeder's fortune was accepted even by so intelligent a man as Lew Kohl.

"You'll get my stocking! Dear me, I shall have to go barefooted," said Mr. Reeder, with a faint show of humor.

"You know what I mean. Think that over. Some hour and day you'll go out, and all Scotland Yard won't catch me for the killing! I've thought that out—"

"One has time to think in Dartmoor," murmured Mr. J. G. Reeder encouragingly. "You're becoming one of the world's thinkers. Are you familiar with Rodin's masterpiece—a truly beautiful statue, Kohl."

"That's all." Lew Kohl rose, the smile still trembling at the corner of his mouth. "Maybe you'll turn this over in your mind, and in a day or two you won't be feeling so sure of yourself."

Reeder's face was pathetic in its sadness. His untidy sandy-grey hair seemed to be standing on end and the large ears, that stood out at right angles to his face,

gave the illusion of quivering movement.

Lew Kohl's hand was on the door-knob.

Womp!

It was the sound of a dull weight striking a board. Something winged past his cheek, and before his eyes a deep hole showed in the wall, and his face was stung by flying grains of plaster. He spun round with a whine of rage.

Mr. Reeder had a long-barreled pistol in his hand, with a barrel-shaped silencer over the muzzle, and he was staring at the weapon open-mouthed.

"Now how on earth did that happen?" he asked in wonder.

Lew Kohl stood trembling with rage and fear, his face yellow-white.

"You—you devil!" he breathed. "You tried to shoot me!"

Mr. Reeder stared at him over his glasses.

"Good gracious—you really believe that? Are you still thinking of killing me, Kohl?"

Kohl tried to speak but found no words. Flinging open the door, he strode down the stairs and through the front entrance. His foot was on the first step when something came hurtling past him and crashed to fragments at his feet.

It was a large stone vase that had decorated the window-sill of Mr. Reeder's bedroom. Leaping over the debris of stone and flower mould, he glared up into the surprised face of Mr. J. G. Reeder.

"I'll get you!" he spluttered.

"I hope you're not hurt?" asked the man at the window in a tone of concern. "These things happen. Some day and some hour—"

As Lew Kohl strode down the street, the detective was still talking.

Mr. Stan Bride was taking his morning shower when his friend and sometime prison associate came into the little room that overlooked Fitzroy Square.

Stan Bride, who bore no resemblance to anything virginal, being a stout and stumpy man with a huge red face and many chins, stopped in the act of drying himself and gazed over the edge of the towel.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked sharply. "You look as if you'd been chased by a hornet. What did you go out so early for?"

Lew told him, and the jovial countenance of his roommate grew longer and longer.

"You crazy fool," he muttered. "To go after Reeder with that stuff! Don't you think he was waiting for you? Do you suppose he didn't know the very moment you left the Moor?"

"I've scared him, anyway," said Lew, and Mr. Bride laughed.

"You scared him!" he sneered. "You scared that old person!"

(He did not say "person.") "If he's as white as you, he *is* scared! But he's not. Of course he shot past you. If he wanted to shoot you, you'd have been stiff by now. But he didn't. Thinker, eh? He's given you something to think about."

"Where that gun came from I don't—"

There was a knock at the door and the two men exchanged glances.

"Who's there?" asked Bride, and a familiar voice answered.

"It's that busy from the Yard," answered Bride, and opened the door.

The "busy" was Sergeant Allford, C.I.D., an affable and portly man and a detective of some promise.

" 'Morning, boys," he said, in greeting. "Not been to church, Stan?"

Stan grinned politely.

"How's trade, Lew?" was Allford's next question.

"Not so bad." The forger was alert, suspicious.

"Come to see you about a gun. I got an idea you're carrying one, Lew—a Colt automatic." He mentioned a serial number. "That's not right, Lew. Guns don't belong to this country."

"I've got no gun," said Lew sullenly.

Bride had suddenly become an old man, for he also was a convict on parole, and the discovery might send him back to serve his unfinished sentence.

"Will you take a little walk to the station, or will you let me go over you?"

"Go over me," said Lew, and put out his arms stiffly while the detective rubbed him down.

"I'll have a look round," said the detective and his 'look round' was very thorough.

"I must have been mistaken," said Sergeant Allford, at last. And then, suddenly: "Was it a gun you chucked into the river as you were walking along the Embankment?"

Lew started. It was the first intimation he had received that he had been "tailed" that morning.

Bride waited till the detective was visible from the window crossing Fitzroy Square. Then he turned in a fury on his companion.

"Clever, ain't you! That old hound knew you had a gun—knew the serial number. And if Allford had found it you'd have been behind bars again before you could crack your finger—and me too!"

"I threw it in the river," said Lew sulkily.

"Brains—not many but some!" said Bride, breathing heavily. "You stay away from Reeder—he's hell and poison, and if you don't know it you're even dumber than you act. Scared him? You fool! He'd hang you with his own

hands and write a hymn about it."

"I didn't know they were tailing me," growled Kohl. "But I'll get him! And his money, too."

"Get him from another rooming house," said Bride curtly. "A crook I don't mind, being one myself. A murderer I don't mind, but a talking jackass makes me sick. Get his stuff if you can. I'll bet it's all invested in real estate, and you can't lift houses. But don't talk about it. I like you, Lew, up to a point. But now you are miles beyond the point and out of sight. I don't like Reeder. I don't like snakes, but I keep away from the Zoo."

So Lew Kohl went into new diggings on the top floor of an Italian's house in Dean Street, and here he had leisure and inclination to brood upon his grievances and to plan afresh the destruction of his enemy. And new plans were needed, for the schemes which had seemed so watertight in the quietude of a Devonshire cell showed daylight through many crevices.

Lew's homicidal urge had undergone considerable modification. He had been experimented upon by a very clever psychologist—though he never regarded Mr. Reeder in this light, and, indeed, had only the vaguest ideas to what the word meant. But there were other ways of hurting Reeder, and his mind fell constantly back to the dream of discovering the detective's hidden treasure.

It was nearly a week later that Mr. Reeder invited himself into the Director's private sanctum, and that great official listened spellbound while his subordinate offered his outrageous theory about Sir James Tithermite and his dead wife. When Mr. Reeder had finished, the Director pushed back his chair from the table.

"My dear man," he said, a little irritably, "I can't possibly give a warrant on the strength of your surmises—not even a search warrant. The story is so fantastic, so incredible, that it would be more at home in the pages of a sensational newspaper story than in a Public Prosecutor's report."

"It was a wild night, and yet Lady Tithermite was not ill," suggested the detective gently. "That is a fact to remember, sir. It has a most vital bearing on the case."

The Director shook his head. "I can't do it—not on the evidence," he said. "I should raise a storm that would swing me into Whitehall. Can't you do anything unofficially?"

Mr. Reeder shook his head. "My presence in the neighborhood has been remarked," he said primly. "I think it would be impossible to—er—cover up my traces. And yet I have located

the place, and could tell you within a few inches—"

Again the Director shook his head.

"No, Reeder," he said quietly, the whole thing is sheer deduction on your part. Oh, yes, I know you have a criminal mind. I think you have told me that before. And that is a good reason why I should not issue a warrant. You're simply crediting this unfortunate man with your ingenuity. Nothing doing!"

Mr. Reeder sighed and went back to his bureau, not entirely despondent, for there had intruded a new element into his investigations.

Mr. Reeder had been to Maidstone several times during the week, and he had not gone alone; though seemingly unconscious of the fact that he had developed a shadow, for he had seen Lew Kohl on several occasions, and had spent an uncomfortable few minutes wondering if his experiment had failed.

On the second occasion an idea had developed in the detective's mind, and if he were a laughing man he would have chuckled aloud when he slipped out of Maidstone station one evening and, in the very act of hiring a cab, had seen Lew Kohl negotiating for another . . .

Mr. Bride was engaged in the tedious but necessary practice of so cutting a pack of cards that the ace of diamonds remained at the bottom, and there was a light of triumph in Lew's cold eye which brought Mr. Bride's heart to his boots.

"Ive got him!" said Lew.

Bride put aside the cards and stood up.

"Got who?" he asked coldly. "And if it's killing, you needn't answer. Just get out!"

"There's been no killing."

Lew sat down squarely at the table, his hands in his pockets, a real smile on his face.

"I've been trailing Reeder for a week, and that fellow wants some trailing."

"Well?" asked the other, when he paused dramatically.

"I've found his stocking!"

Bride scratched his chin, and was half convinced. "You have?"

Lew nodded. "He's been going to Maidstone a lot lately, and driving to a little village about five miles out. There I always lost him. But the other night, when he came back to the station to catch the last train, he slipped into the waiting room and I found a place where I could watch him. What do you think he did?"

Mr. Bride hazarded no suggestion.

"He opened his bag," said Lew impressively, "and took out a wad of notes as thick as that! He'd been drawing on his bank! I trailed him up to London. There's a restaurant on the station

and he went in to get a cup of coffee, with me keeping well out of his sight. As he came out of the restaurant he took out his handkerchief and wiped his mouth.

"He didn't see the little book that dropped, but I did. I was scared sick that somebody else would see it, or that he'd wait long enough to find it himself. But he went out of the station and I got that book before you could say 'knife'. Look!"

It was a well-worn little notebook, covered with faded red morocco. Bride put out his hand to take it.

"Wait a bit," said Lew. "Are you in this with me fifty-fifty. I must know, because I want some help."

Bride hesitated. "If it's just plain thieving, I'm with you," he said.

"Plain thieving—and sweet," said Lew exultantly, and pushed the book across the table.

For the greater part of the night they sat together talking in low tones, discussing impartially the methodical bookkeeping of Mr. J. G. Reeder and his exceeding dishonesty.

Monday night was wet. A storm blew up from the southwest, and the air was filled with falling leaves as Lew and his companion traveled the five miles which separated them from the village. Neither carried any impedimenta that was visible, yet under Lew's waterproof coat was a kit of tools of singular ingenuity, and Mr. Bride's coat pockets were weighted down with the sections of a powerful jimmy.

They met nobody in their walk, and the church bell was striking eleven when Lew gripped the bars of the south Lodge gates, pulled himself up to the top and dropped lightly on the other side.

He was followed by Mr. Bride, who, in spite of his bulk, was a singularly agile man. The ruined lodge showed in the darkness, and they passed through the creaking gates to the door and Lew flashed his lantern upon the keyhole before he began manipulation with the implements which he had taken from his kit.

The door was opened in ten minutes and a few seconds later they stood in a low-roofed little room, the principal feature of which was a deep, grateless fireplace.

Lew took off his mackintosh and stretched it over the window before he spread the light in his lamp. Then, kneeling down, he brushed the debris from the hearth, examining the joints of the big stone carefully.

"This work's been botched," he said. "Anybody could see that."

He put the claw of the jimmy into a crack and levered up the stone, and it moved slightly.

Stopping only to dig a deeper crevice with a chisel and hammer he thrust the claw of the jimmy farther down. The stone came up above the edge of the floor and Bride slipped the chisel underneath.

"Now together," grunted Lew.

They got their fingers beneath the hearthstone and with one heave hinged it up. Lew picked up the lamp and, kneeling down, flashed a light into the dark cavity. And then:

"Oh, My God!" he shrieked.

A second later two terrified men rushed from the house into the drive. And a miracle had happened, for the gates were open and a dark figure stood squarely before them.

"Put up your hands, Kohl!" said a voice and, hateful as it was to Lew Kohl, he could have fallen on the neck of Mr. Reeder.

At twelve o'clock that night Sir James Tithermite was discussing matters with his bride-to-be: the stupidity of her lawyer, who wished to safeguard her fortune, and his own cleverness and foresight in securing complete freedom of action for the girl who was to be his wife.

"These blackguards think of nothing but their fees," he began, when his footman came in unannounced, and behind him the Chief Constable of the county and a man he remembered seeing before.

"Sir James Tithermite?" said the Chief Constable unnecessarily, for he knew Sir James very well.

"Yes, Colonel, what is it?" asked the baronet, his face twitching.

"I am taking you into custody on a charge of wilfully murdering your wife, Eleanor Mary Tithermite."

"The whole thing turned upon the question as to whether Lady Tithermite was a good or a bad sailor," explained J. G. Reeder to his chief. "If she were a bad sailor, it was unlikely that she would be on the ship, even for five minutes, without calling for the stewardess. The stewardess did not see her ladyship, nor did anybody on board, for the simple reason that she was not on board!

"She was murdered within the grounds of the Manor. Her body was buried beneath the hearthstone of the old lodge, and Sir James continued his journey by car to Dover, handing over his packages to a porter and telling him to take them to his cabin before he returned to put the car into the hotel garage. He had timed his arrival so that he passed on board with a crowd of passengers from the boat train, and nobody knew whether he was alone or whether he was accompanied, and, as a matter of fact, nobody cared.

"The purser gave him his key, and he put the baggage, includ-

ing his wife's hat, into the cabin, paid the porter and dismissed him. Officially, Lady Tithermite was on board, for he surrendered her ticket to the collector and received her landing voucher. And then he discovered she had disappeared. The ship was searched, but of course the unfortunate lady was not found. As I remarked before, the fact is not surprising."

"You have a criminal mind," said the Director good-humoredly. "Go on, Reeder."

"Having this queer and objectional trait, I saw how very simple a matter it was to give the illusion that the lady was on board, and I decided that, if the murder was committed, it must have been within a few miles of the house. And then the local builder told me that he had given Sir James a little lesson in the art of mixing mortar. And the local blacksmith told me that the gate had been damaged—presumably by Sir James' car.

"I had seen the broken rods and all I wanted to know was when the repairs were effected. That she was beneath the hearth in the lodge I was certain. Without a search warrant it was impossible to prove or disprove my theory, and I myself could not conduct a private investigation without risking the reputation of our department—if I may say 'our,' " he added apologetically.

The Director was thoughtful. "Of course, you induced this man Kohl to dig up the hearth by pretending you had money buried there. I presume you revealed the fact in your notebook? But why on earth did he imagine that you had a hidden treasure?"

Mr. Reeder smiled sadly. "The criminal mind is a peculiar thing," he said, with a sigh. "It harbors illusions and fairy stories. Fortunately, I understand that mind. As I have often said . . ."

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DEATH AT MY ELBOW

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in the next SAINT

the flattie

by . . . Ray Humphreys

Kendrick of Homicide disliked bright young cops in uniform. But a hard-to-solve murder can turn a detective's world topsy-turvy.

"He's stone cold dead!" rasped the coroner's deputy, straightening up from his swift inspection of the grotesquely sprawled figure in the cheap—and now stained—bed.

He spoke to no one in particular, and none of the other five men in the room made any immediate comment. Two evinced interest, however. The one farthest from the bed, with a press card stuck in his hat, was scribbling notes on the back of an envelope. The other, in the blue uniform of a patrolman, was bending forward to stare more intently at the corpse, his brows heavily knitted.

The remaining three, in matching soft gray fedoras and immaculate light suits, stood motionless, their faces merely hard masks. They were from the homicide squad out of central headquarters. Violent death was just routine to them—and a little boring.

"Dead?" came a belated echo from the tenement hall as a badger-gray old lady stuck her

In every city police department there's usually a great deal of mystery surrounding the homicide detail. Most of it is self-created by men who find it advantageous — and their motives are the opposite of unworthy — to work in secrecy until they've established a promising lead. But occasionally an inexcusable, bullying attitude creeps in. With convincing realism Ray Humphreys makes that attitude boomerang, in a most exciting yarn.

head in the door. "Aw, an' he was such a fine gentleman—"

"Are you the landlady?" barked Detective Sergeant Kendrick, the tallest of the three from headquarters.

"Yes, sir—I am!" There was a trace of refinement in the tired voice. The old lady dabbed at one eye with the fringe of her apron, and asked: "Are you police officers?"

"We're from the Bureau!" Kendrick briefly flashed the badge on his vest. "I'm Sergeant Kendrick. These gentlemen are Detectives Bellamy and Mueller. Do you know who killed him, lady?"

The little old lady seemed to cringe back in protest.

"Who killed Mr. Otto?" she corrected, precisely. "I'm sure I wouldn't know—unless it was that friend of his who often came up here very intoxicated. But I can't remember—"

"I'd advise you to remember!" there was a peremptory sternness in the sergeant's voice.

"But—" began the old lady, lifting her apron again.

"There, there!" said the patrolman soothingly, speaking for the first time. "Take it easy. Nobody's accusing you. See if you can't—"

"Well, now!" cut in Sergeant Kendrick, sarcastically, "We seem to have a social worker amongst us, boys! Who asked you to take part in this questioning, flatfoot? We're in charge here."

But the old lady shot the patrolman a grateful glance as he stepped back a bit, flushing. He held his tongue, however.

"What was this girl friend's name, lady?" went on Sergeant Kendrick, glowering at the uniformed man. "You'll gain nothing by keeping silent."

"It wasn't a lady friend!" came the quiet answer. "The friend was a man."

"A man, eh?" Sergeant Kendrick was visibly disappointed. "Well, what was his name?"

"He had a very peculiar name, sir. Mr. Sausage, I think it was."

The three detectives, and the coroner's deputy and the newspaper reporter laughed loudly. "He painted things," faltered the old lady.

"What things?"

"Pictures, I guess, sir!"

The sergeant jabbed his pencil back in his pocket. "Where does this artist fellow live?"

"I don't know, sir."

The patrolman leaned over and patted her reassuringly on the shoulder.

"Some half-baked young squirt who thinks he can paint," decided Sergeant Kendrick, swiftly. He frowned blackly at the copper. "Flattie, you'd better go down to the front door and keep everyone out. You've no business idling around up here,

anyway! This is a case for the brains."

The patrolman colored again. After all, it was his beat. The murder, if unsolved, might end up by being a blot on his record. He wanted it cleaned up. He touched the visor of his cap slowly.

"Pardon me, Sergeant, but if I could suggest—" he began.

"Downstairs, flattie!" The sergeant's voice was hard. "I'll handle this without any advice from harness bulls!"

The patrolman whirled, tight-lipped, and marched downstairs.

"You're sure the name was *Sausage?"* demanded Sergeant Kendrick, eyeing the old lady again, austerely. "That's an incredible name!"

"I'm pretty sure," said the old lady, fearfully. "It seems he—"

The sergeant ripped out an oath. "Well, what's his description? Suppose you give it to me!"

The old lady did. It wasn't a bad description.

"We'll get him!" Sergeant Kendrick snapped a rubber band on his notebook with impressive finality. "Mueller, your first job will be to go through the city directory at the corner drugstore. Bellamy and I will check the three or four blocks on Thirty-third where those long-hair artists hang out. You'd better meet us over there in half an hour. So long, Doc!"

The coroner's deputy, greatly impressed, waved a farewell.

At the street door, three flights down, Sergeant Kendrick tapped the waiting uniformed man on the shoulder.

"You stay here until they move the stiff!" He paused, tilting his fedora a bit more to the left. "And hereafter, flattie, you stick close to your beat and leave the skull work to homicide, see? You might get reported for meddling."

"Yes, sir!" Again the patrolman's face flamed.

Sergeant Kendrick stalked away, cockily, Bellamy at his side. Sergeant Kendrick hadn't spent too much time in harness. He had a cousin, over in District X, where the big vote was polled, and the cousin had helped. The sergeant had no patience with flatties.

"There's nothing dumber than a dumb harness bull!" said Kendrick.

"Ain't you so right!" agreed Bellamy.

But on Thirty-third Street they soon wearied of their search. They rang doorbells and rapped and asked questions, but no one, it seemed, had ever heard of an artist named Sausage. Or, indeed, of anyone with a name even remotely resembling sausage.

Mueller had joined them, equally unhappy. The city directory had been no help. And he had even called the central

identification bureau and the newspaper morgues and the artist supply houses and had walked three long blocks out of his way to personally check the section's sub-postoffice.

But no Mr. Sausage.

"That jitter-pated old lady back there is too stupid to lie to us!" said Sergeant Kendrick as he and Mueller and Bellamy sought temporary respite in a tavern and had a couple of beers. "But we'll go back and try again. I won't be so easy on her this time. I told that reporter that we'd crack this case in a hour and a half and that I'd call him with the details."

"We better get movin', Sarge!" said Mueller.

At the tenement they found the uniformed man still at the street door.

"Holy grief!" exploded Sergeant Kendrick, angrily. "Are you still here, flattie? Haven't you got sense enough to leave when the excitement is over? You ought to be turned in for stupidity! What's the name of your captain? Who's your sergeant? I'm going to report you, if it's the last thing I do on this case."

But the copper smiled. He folded his arms.

"I've been waiting for you," he said. "I figured you might be back!" He looked Sergeant Kendrick straight in the eye now. "My boss is Sergeant Dooley. He's inside now. So is a deputy district attorney. And also that newspaper reporter. *The Tribune* photographer just left. He took my picture. You see—"

The outraged Sergeant Kendrick seized the patrolman by the shoulders, none too gently.

"What are you mumbling about, flattie?"

"Nothing—except I got the murderer!" There was the faintest suspicion of a smile in the copper's blue eyes. "I wanted to suggest to you before you left. But you wouldn't listen. Sausage was a funny name—too funny. But I figured it might be Frankfurter, say, or Wiener. I found a Wiener in the city directory, living just across the street. I found him in bed with a quart—and blood on him. I got the knife. He confessed so I pinched him and called Sergeant Dooley."

The flattie seemed to grow taller suddenly as Sergeant Kendrick appeared to shrink a little, along with Detectives Muller and Bellamy.

"Wiener's a sign painter," added the patrolman, pointedly.

—Continued from Back Cover

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